

IRISH DISABILITY:
POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES OF STUNTED DEVELOPMENT

BY

SARAH MARIE GRAY

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Joseph Valente, Chair
Associate Professor Jim Hansen
Professor Vicki Mahaffey
Associate Professor Susan Koshy

Abstract

In his 1941 poem *The Great Hunger*, a scathing critique of rural idealism in mid-twentieth-century Ireland, Patrick Kavanagh defines his Irish anti-hero by the “impotent worm on his thigh,” a “no-target gun” that represents his purposeless masculinity as life becomes “dried in [his] veins.” Twenty years later, Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy* presents the coming-of-age tale of Caithleen Brady, an Irish colleen deemed “mad in one eye” by her foreign suitor before having herself sterilized and committing suicide. Both bring to mind Samuel Beckett’s grotesquely disfigured and confined narrators who prefigure Francie Brady, the mentally ill and murderous villain-hero of Patrick McCabe’s 1992 novel *The Butcher Boy*. In this first decade of the twenty-first century, Jamie O’Neill and Roddy Doyle look back one hundred years to the fight for Irish Independence and pen nationalist soldiers fueled by the bitterness and suffering that attend their disability and disenfranchisement—Doyle’s Doyler Doyle of *At Swim, Two Boys* walks with a limp and Henry Smart of *A Star Called Henry* fights British soldiers and abusive Irish clerics with his father’s wooden leg. As this catalogue attests, physical and mental disabilities permeate colonial and postcolonial Ireland in the wake of a surge of Irish nationalism demanding, as W.B. Yeats writes in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, that a true Irishman “must give [Ireland] all” to the point of martyrdom.

In bringing together disability studies and postcolonial Irish literature, I investigate the creation of a standard national narrative for accepted ability and development, the breakdown of these categories, and the role of national discourse in isolating the “disabled” as it simultaneously allies physical and mental disability with moral and intellectual deviancy and corruption. The proliferation of physical impairment, spiritual frustration, and social unrest displayed in modern Irish literature critiques the nationalist banner that promised a cure for Irish

cultural and political imprisonment. I argue that rather than championing a middle-class triumph over deviancy and demonstrating the development of Irish stability, postcolonial Irish literature exposes Irish development—religious, national, cultural, and individual—as inevitably stunted by both imperial narratives of Irish disability and the equally oppressive nationalist narratives that came to replace them in the Irish postcolonial imaginary.

By reading postcolonial Irish narratives through the framework of disability, I venture beyond a critical reliance on the oppression of colonialism to examine the stunting effects of an Irish Catholic nationalism developed by adherence to a pure ideal that rejects sexual, religious, and cultural difference as disabling to an Irish nation. Rather than simply emphasizing an Irish postcolonial triumph over imperial narratives of Irish disability, my dissertation yields a fresh approach that reveals the inevitable stunting of Irish narratives of progress both by imperial policy and the compounding oppression of normative Irish nationalism that further “disables” and marginalizes those deemed physically and mentally unfit for national inclusion.

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Freedom. In this place. Never was, never would be. What was it, anyway?
Freedom to do what you liked, that was one thing. Freedom to do what you
should, that was another.

Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark*

Chapter 1

Empire, Nation, Disability

One of the first steps, says Lennard Davis in *Enforcing Normalcy*, “in the task of rethinking and theorizing disability...is to understand the relationship between physical impairment and the political, social, even spatial environment that places that impairment in a matrix of meanings and significations.”¹ Concerning the historically constructed notion of “disability,” a term we now accept almost unflinchingly as a stable descriptive agent, we must consider Davis’s assertion that “there is no disability without an implied response. A socio-political process is always at work in relation to the body” (xvi). “Disabled,” as it is set firmly against a concept of the physically and mentally “abled,” is, like the binary components of “straight/gay, male/female, black/white, rich/poor,” a term entangled in an “ideology of containment and a politics of power and fear” (4). In his historical investigation of the emergence of disability discourse—tied inextricably to a discourse of the “norm”—Davis suggests disability as the safely marginalized Other of behavior, appearance, and function coded as “normal,” a constructed concept that denotes progress, industrialization, and “the ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie.”²

The novel, Davis claims, is a “proliferator of ideology” and thus “the twentieth-century novel promulgates and disburses notions of normalcy and by extension makes of physical differences ideological differences” (26). Davis’s extrapolation of the term “disabled” from our current vocabulary is necessary in beginning to examine the naming of the “disabled,” the Others of “normal” or “able” society so long denied critical and theoretical representation. His characterization of the novel form, however, as that which is primarily invested in reinstating and reifying social normalcy demands a rethinking in light of the modern Irish novel and its

urgency to divest the “normal” of their rhetorical safety and highlight the supposedly “disabled” as heroic, albeit tragic, exemplars of modern postcolonial subjectivity. As British colonialism and Irish nationalism collide in a dangerously unstable intersection, they both construct a discourse of disability and react in horror to the disabled in their midst. As it attempts to counter British imperial discourse, Irish nationalism constructs parameters of ability—closely allied always with acceptability—that further divide and stunt a growing nation crippled in mind and body from centuries of imperial misrule itself brandishing a rhetoric of Irish weakness, deformity, and incapacity.

At issue here are thus many problematic categories and questions regarding the construction and definition of normalcy, disability, and development. In bringing disability studies to bear on Irish postcolonialism and literature, we must consider the creation, rhetorically at least, of an ideal Irish nation, its standard narrative for accepted ability and development, the breakdown of these categories, and the ultimate role of national discourse in isolating the disabled as it simultaneously allies physical and mental disability (or, more accurately, impairment) with moral and intellectual deviancy and corruption. Irish postcolonial literature evinces repeatedly this meta-physical condemnation of disability and the brazen rhetorical move of both marginalizing the disabled and, as importantly, labeling as disabled those who threaten the image of a successfully modern, progressive, and capable Irish nation. In highlighting the creation and enforcement of these categories of ability, postcolonial Irish novels interrogate both disability and, more importantly, the disabling effects of an Irish discourse of ability/disability. Rather than championing a middle-class triumph over deviancy and demonstrating the development of Irish (st)ability, postcolonial Irish literature exposes Irish development—religious, national, cultural, and individual—as inevitably stunted by both imperial narratives of

Irish disability and the equally oppressive nationalist narratives that came to replace them in the Irish postcolonial imaginary.

Irish individual and national development, as displayed in postcolonial Irish literature, occurs amidst competing scripts of appropriate Irishness and an adequately representative sense of progression and success. In explicating and critiquing the work of eugenicist statisticians like Sir Francis Galton, Davis notes that in contemporary, modern society, “the new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm” (35).³ The idea of a “normal” body thus becomes so imbued with significance that the “norm” in fact becomes an ideal to always be replicated. The “imperative of the norm” is, then, “supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be” (35). The triangulation of these three concepts—normal bodies, perfected human progression, and potentially subversive deviances—suggests a clear link between individual development and a predetermined standard of human ability and capacity that in turn determines larger ideas of human development and, we can add, national development. Davis in fact highlights the role of statistical human analysis in creating this obsession with national perfection as it relates to the national “body” by way of the nation’s actual bodies—“the emphasis on nation and national fitness,” he writes, “obviously plays into the metaphor of the body. If individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit.” Davis’s important note that “such arguments are based on a false notion of the body politic—as if a hunchbacked citizenry would make a hunchbacked nation” (36) underscores rather than detracts from the power of such rhetoric of ability to define and create national prowess and national anxiety about failure. Irish postcolonial literature illustrates in its hunchbacked, blind, limping, aching, and coughing bodies a nation abused by poverty and

maltreatment as it reflects a nation of individuals unable to develop an identity apart from the demeaning—and therefore emotionally disabling—rhetoric of imperial and national policies.

As postcolonial Irish literature clearly highlights, the burgeoning sense of national identity in Ireland finds in the Catholic Church a particularly strong normalizing force. Davis's critique of normalcy's consequent categorizing of difference and deviance is quite clearly illustrated by the role of Catholic morality in establishing norms of Irish behavior and, more importantly, in labeling as spiritually, emotionally, and physically disabled those who fall outside these bounds. As with any difference-based classification, "with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes. When we think of bodies," writes Davis, "in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (29). As a study of Irish literature shows, the role of fervent religious nationalism in Ireland creates an interesting double-move in which people with disabilities are considered deviant—a long-held religious belief (reaching back well before the Christian era) that links physical impairment to spiritual punishment—and in which people considered spiritually deviant are represented as disabled which consequently contributes to the characterization of the disabled community more generally. As we see in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*, disability in the Ireland of a very Catholic Irish national revival becomes aligned with homosexuality; in the mid-twentieth-century Ireland of Eamon de Valera's emphasis on patriarchy and female submission, disability and sterility present the only acceptable end for a woman who eschews subservience to marriage and child-rearing; in colonial and postcolonial literature as I read it here, the official face of Irish Catholicism, and generally of the Irish nation, always projects a sense of normalcy and moral fitness while disbelievers and alleged sinners represent deviancy, disability, and failure.

In his important explication of disability studies, Davis brings to the fore issues of identity formation and social paranoia that set the classification of disability apart from that of race, gender, class, and other classic markers of identity that we now accept as constructed always with favor given to a particular ideal. It is significant, Davis notes, that “disability is not a static category but one which expands and contracts to include ‘normal’ people as well” (xv). Disabilities are, in fact, “acquired by living in the world, but also by working in factories, driving insufficiently safe cars, living in toxic environments or high-crime areas” (8). While this qualification does not dismiss the reality that “constructions of disability assume that the person with disabilities is in some sense damaged while the observer is undamaged” (14), it does suggest an even more anxious relationship between those labeled “disabled” and those considered, *for now*, to be “normal.” That “poor people comprise a disproportionate number of the disabled” (14) also suggests a relationship among social treatment of the disabled, social recognition of a spectrum of ability, and social desire to reject and ignore those previously deemed unfit to participate in “normal” society.⁴ Davis’s title—“Introduction: Disability, the Missing Term in the Race, Class, Gender Triad”—links the disabled community to other socially marginalized groups and, as I do in my reading of Irish postcolonial literature, suggests that disability functions in modern society as a tool in the formulation and projection of national image and acceptable standards of personal development.

The prominent representation of disability in Irish literature adds, I argue, to this discussion of normalizing and disabling rhetoric by introducing imperialism as a historical and political force that creates disability and makes particular use of the language of disability in overpowering perceived weakness and justifying conquest. As well, Irish postcolonial literature critiques both imperialism and nationalism as they define the communal or national body by

terms of ability and ultimately limit the potential and development of the very communities they idealize. Considering the representation of disability in literature, Davis asserts that “if disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters...can be deformed in ways that arouse pity...On the other hand...villains tend to be physically abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated” (41). Most important, then, in my study of Irish literature is its direct refutation of Davis’s (highly logical and largely true) claim about the role of disabled characters. In postcolonial Irish literature, the disabled and supposedly deviant characters represent, I argue, the heroic monikers of a true Ireland struggling to maintain and proclaim its dignity against the disabling narratives of human perfectibility and progress proffered by both the imperial forces intending to put down and the national cries attempting to uplift the Irish people.

These postcolonial and national Irish heroes appear on the scene only after a centuries-long imperial debate over Irish disability, a term aptly applied to Irish inability to succeed and gain power against imperial rule and erroneously used to characterize Irish sensibility. As the penal laws restricted the practice of Irish Catholicism, they also punished Irish Catholics for their religious belief and, perhaps more importantly, refused them the economic and social advancement afforded to their Protestant countrymen.⁵ Such a debilitating disadvantage clearly contributes both to Irish Catholic underdevelopment in economic terms as it even more significantly enacts an Irish Catholic sense of unrest with imperial rule and positions Irish Catholics outside the power-play and decision-making of communal development. That imperial rhetoric defines the Irish as different from and inferior to the English is clear. As Mary Jean Corbett suggests, though, in *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing*, not all imperial-minded thinkers and politicians founded supposed Irish disability on the basis of racial

essentialism.⁶ Edmund Burke, famously Irish and infamously pro-Empire,⁷ believed, Corbett writes, that “perceptions of the Irish as different—were in good part historically produced by English rule,” particularly the penal laws, and that “economic and political disabilities determined the national character and conduct of the Irish, not the other way around.” Importantly, as Corbett notes, the “very circumstances that Burke construes as producing Irish disaffection and difference” would ultimately be represented as “attributable only to the racial, national, gendered character of the Irish themselves” (38).

Such lengthy attention to Burke’s nuanced convergence of Irish character and Irish maltreatment highlights both the ways in which political inability marginalizes those labeled unfit for inclusion in the political process and, more importantly for a study of Irish disability, the urgency with which Burke’s contemporaries (and those that followed) racialized Irish character and identified an Irish deviancy and disability that countered a “normal” English sense of ability and strength. As in 1800 the Act of Union absorbed Ireland into a greater sense of Britishness, it did so with the understanding that the inferior and always intractable character of the Irish demanded the superior and humanizing touch of English intellect and ability. As represented in literature and political tracts, this “marriage” of English and Irish sensibility constructs Ireland as a “complementary but ever unequal partner in the family of Great Britain.” Importantly for Corbett’s analysis, this marriage metaphor as well “maps gender difference and cultural difference together” (53). Such identification of Irish character with feminine weakness and intellectual incapacity indeed haunts the characterization of Irishness in imperial rhetoric that clearly denies Irish equality and affects well beyond the colonial period an Irish nationalism intent always on refuting this disabling rhetoric.

In his 1865-6 lectures given as the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University, Matthew Arnold makes an ironic proclamation considering the definition of national character:

Nations in hitting off one another's characters are apt, we all know, to seize the unflattering side rather than the flattering; the mass of mankind always do this, and indeed they really see what is novel, and not their own, in a *disfiguring* light. Thus we ourselves, for instance, popularly say "the phlegmatic Dutchman" rather than "the sensible Dutchman," or "the grimacing Frenchman" rather than "the polite Frenchman." Therefore neither we nor the Germans should exactly accept the description strangers give of us...the character itself, which they give us both, may be a caricature rather than a faithful picture of us.⁸

Despite this disclaimer—well toward the end of Arnold's *The Study of Celtic Literature*—Arnold systematically defines the Celt in terms ultimately disabling to the Irish fight for national recognition and political power. Arnold's telling suggestion that one nation's characterizing of another may be "disfiguring" highlights the power of rhetoric in shaping the perception of national character and in validating the project of British imperialism. Arnold's assertion that the Celt maintains "not a promising political temperament," as does the Anglo-Saxon, but is rather "undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent by nature" (91) confirms the superiority of English character and more importantly reinforces power structures in place to restrict Irish ability and prevent the development of an Irish nation capable of self-rule. Though Arnold admits to the "disfiguring" potential of outside judgment on national character, English reliance on the rhetorical suppression of Irish aptitude attests to the much stronger ability of such judgment to confirm and perpetuate its own conclusions. Contrary to Burke's suggestion that English maltreatment affects Irish political unrest and consequent character, Arnold proclaims that the Celt's lack of "balance, measure, and patience" (86) and his "rebellion against fact" have "lamed him in the world of business and politics!" In a most final refutation of Celtic ability, Arnold indeed asserts that "the skillful and resolute appliance of means to ends which is needed both to make progress in material civilization, and also to form powerful states, is just what the

Celt has least turn for” (88). The condemnation here of Celtic inability, linked to ideas of national progress and political power, effectively sets in place a continuum of intellectual strength on which the English reign superior. Arnold’s concentration upon Irish sentiment and femininity as well illustrates the role of imperial rhetoric in defining proper national character and ultimately creating an Irish nationalism obsessed with masculine prowess and the suppression of both Irish women and supposedly feminine national attributes.

As he explains Celtic temperament, Arnold invokes an image of the Irish people defined not by disabilities *per se* but by an inability to compete in the modern world of rational political thought—a label that importantly confirms Ireland’s colonial position. His attestation that we should “not...wish that the Celt had had less sensibility” supports the romantic notion that the use of Irishness lay in the presentation of “chivalry and romance and the glorification of a feminine ideal” (90) rather than an ability to affect the realm of realistic, rational action. Such a back-handed compliment to Celtic sensibility highlights Arnold’s imperial motives and clearly illustrates his infantilizing of the Celt and the modern Irish colony. The Celt, he says, “loves bright colours, company, and pleasure” (88)—this childish gratification of the senses is opposed to English focus on the intellectual, rational, and political. In unabashedly proclaiming the political weakness of the Celt and aligning Irish sensibility with “something feminine” that is attractive though improper and impractical, Arnold defines imperial English character as that which necessarily must command and control the arch of Irish history. To Ireland’s feminine wiles, England lends masculine discipline and strength. Arnold’s suggestion that one can be “magnetized and exhilarated” (92) by the Celt despite and because of his dreamy sensibility further divides the two nationalities, creating an Irishman so un-English as to arouse curiosity and fascination.⁹ This distinction importantly creates a racial hierarchy whose national and

individual implications outweigh and outlast the political hierarchy enacted by the Empire's political conquest of Irish land.

Such entrenched ideological belief in national character as Arnold displays finds its corollary in the stirrings of the Irish Revival and Douglas Hyde's 1893 founding of the Gaelic League. Subsequent Irish nationalizing by their own spokesmen confirms the importance of Arnold's privileging of English character and suggests that national politics must spring not only from practical needs but from the passions and desires of the people themselves. As W.B. Yeats does in "The Celtic Element in Literature," D.P. Moran in "The Battle of Two Civilizations" clearly gives credence to Arnold's contention that the English and Irish are fundamentally different in character and sensibility. The very idea of battling national characters sets in place a view of Irishness that is necessarily defined by Englishness as it critiques an Englishness inferior to Irish passion and imaginative power.¹⁰ Moran's opening cry reflects a growing frustration with the process of defining Irish power amidst political weakness: "Let the truth be stated," Moran says, "though the sky should fall. We are sick of 'Irish national' make-believes and frauds, sick of shouting nation when there is no nation; and the much-abused national consciousness of the Irish people cries for truth and light."¹¹ Moran's initial dismissal of the "nation" and his swift conversion of "national consciousness" into the character of an "Irish civilization" highlights the importance of communal self-identification beyond concern with political power. Moran's criticism of Irish national leaders stems from their desire to "fight for Irish nationality" while "Irish civilization [is] thrown overboard" (27). Moran certainly exposes the false logic of Arnold's claims by asserting that, to the Englishman, "everything is tainted with barbarism that is not British." England's "denial that, if [other civilizations] happen to be any way weak, there is any justification whatever for their existence" (26) in turn justifies its

imperial conquests and falsely confirms its own superior character by use of political and military power. Such harsh criticism of the imperial mission and Moran's sarcastic quip that there are "worthier things between heaven and earth than English music halls" indeed dare to question England's supposedly divinely-sanctioned superiority to Irish inherent disability. Moran's ultimate plea, that the Irish should "cultivate our national pride" and concentrate their "master-passions" on the "construction of our own nation" (40) finds its surprising fulfillment in the building of an Irish national character by Douglas Hyde, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and an Irish cultural revival that emphasizes the very imaginative and romantic sensibility Matthew Arnold so caustically mocks.

In arguing against Arnold's criticism and in favor of superior Irish national character, Yeats points to the "primitive" roots that enable all Irishmen to maintain a moral and cultural superiority to the English and hopes thus to bolster them for political revolution. Yeats's political and fictional writings return obsessively to the Gaelic myths and stories that, he believes, delineate a primitive Gaelic heroism to counter English claims of superiority. Such stories rely, though, on heroic failure and blood sacrifice, calling to mind the very romance and chivalry Arnold critiques. In his own and Ireland's defense, Yeats upholds Celtic sentiment as that which suggests superior spiritual worth and chosenness.¹² This exceptionality, he hopes, defines a Celtic sensibility far superior to the dry rationality Arnold champions. Yeats's position is, thus, quite dangerous in light of English characterization of Irish inferiority. By essentially conceding to Arnold's argument (though not his terms), Yeats hopes, perhaps naively, to once again set the Irish apart in their understanding of spiritual values. His concession risks, however, characterizing the Irish as subsumed by ancient cares, pre-modern, and thus unable to govern themselves and exist as an independent modern nation. Again in agreeing, for the most part,

with Arnold's evaluation of Irish literature and Irishness, Yeats sacrifices Irish political power to a greater aim of moral superiority and poetic sensibility, a celebration most likely wasted on the English powers-that-be. His separation of Irish political desire from Irish ethnicity and spiritual character does, however, reflect the Revival's aims of building an Irish nation from the core out, hoping first to create an Irish civilization rather than merely abolishing English power. The process of fashioning this Irish civilization will, indeed, fuel an Irish revival of cultural production and communal strength; it will also, though, define Irish character in very specific terms that ultimately constrain and marginalize the many Irish men, women, and children who eventually threaten these narrow confines.

Irish nationalism, says Seamus Deane in *Celtic Revivals*, "is a moral passion more than it is a political ideology."¹³ This founding sentiment on Irish character is, Deane continues, "so imbued with the sense of the past as a support for action in the present that it has never looked beyond that" (15). This tendency of Irish nationalism to look nostalgically at the past and cling to an imagined and as yet uncreated Irish nation is well reflected in the political writings of Yeats's time and, even more, in the poetry and plays that stirred a generation of Irish revolutionaries to spill their blood for an Irish cause that was ill-defined and even more ill-conceived. Yeats's response to charges of weak Irish sentimentality is particularly striking in that its reliance on and elevation of Gaelic mythology recall the epigraph that frames Arnold's analysis of Celtic literature—"They went forth to the war, but they always fell." In Arnold's use, this quote—attributed to the famed Celtic bard Ossian—reads, of course, as an attack on Celtic military prowess and highlights the failure of the Celts to grasp and control their own fate. Their fighting spirit is undermined by consistent inability to succeed and, through this identification, Arnold already highlights a disparity between Irish desire or intention and actual progress.

Yeats's use of Ossian's tales and his obsessive focus on the Gaelic mythological figure Cuchulain enact a similar divide but with an intent to mold an Irish character ready for a final victory after centuries of oppression. As an investigation of Irish literature and history shows, though, the ultimate collision of Ossianian romance and revolutionary martyrdom yields real suffering for the Irish people and dashed hopes for any real sense of national or individual freedom from tyranny. Yeats's "Easter, 1916" clearly attests to this disillusionment after his revivalist plays and exhorting poetry call for an Irish masculinity ready to water with blood the fields of the nation. While Yeats renegotiates his desires and his writing in light of revolutionary trauma to the Irish landscape and its people, Irish nationalism persists in its eulogizing of a lost Irish purity ready to be regained and revitalized by the modern nation. This desire for national stability that combines rigid Catholic morality with pastoral idealism and heroic masculinity ultimately materializes in the Irish Free State, a transitional stage of Irish political development that replaces imperial rhetoric of Irish weakness with a national obsession with moral and patriarchal strength.

Despite an important emphasis on the residue of imperial rhetoric and material imperial abuses, Irish authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries clearly underscore the role of national ideals in shaping an Irish nation struggling to maintain a sense of communal identity and define Irishness in less than constricting terms. Eamon de Valera's 1937 rewrite of Ireland's constitution sets in place a view of Irishness in the new Republic of Ireland that relies on such traditional notions of hearth and home idealism that turn-of-the-century revivalism located in pastoral elegy and the elevation of the Irish spirit. This study—as it also critiques British imperial conquest and the attendant suffering of Ireland's people—examines the role of Irish nationalism in marginalizing the very people it initially purported to free from oppressive

imperial narratives of Irish weakness. Chapter two examines Irish literary backlash against revivalist and Free State idealizing of Irish rural simplicity and Catholic morality as embodied in the rigors of country life. Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* both clearly critique the notion of spiritual transcendence of material life in their scathing critiques of a confining adherence to Catholic mandates of sexual purity and of the necessary privileging of "rural growth," or the cultivation of the land, over individual development and happiness. That both Kavanagh and O'Brien present heroically disabled Irish characters—Patrick and Caithleen are deemed alternately incapable and insane; both are ultimately sexually sterile and thus unfit for the regeneration or progeneration of Irishness—first suggests a modern and fully independent Irish nation defined by an inability to make social and economic progress for its citizens. That Caithleen has herself voluntarily sterilized at a young age—while Patrick simply allows himself to become sterile with old age—further highlights the nation's role in its own stunting.

Considering city life and the development of middle-class anxiety about material wealth, social progress, and moral aptitude, chapter three of this study brings together the works of Samuel Beckett with the contemporary Irish author Patrick McCabe. In examining these authors in tandem, I showcase a decades-long Irish obsession with storytelling and highlight the role of such narratives in creating both solace and terror for the Irish community. Focusing on Beckett's *Malone Dies* and its striking similarities to McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, I contend that imperial degradation of the Irish character—specifically through references to animality and brutality—merges with Irish self-definition and prevents the development of Irish character beyond certain externally-imposed bounds. The internalization of these narratives in part finds blame, though, in the new Irish nation's desire to thwart previous attacks on Irishness by marginalizing anyone

who does not exhibit exceptional national fitness. Here again, the rampant physical and mental disability displayed in these texts links the pressures of national ideology to expectant failure and highlights the nation's desire to label as disabled and improperly Irish anyone who cannot project a sense of Irish strength. Both novels' use of public institutions and treatment centers as well serves to critique an Irish nation ostensibly focused on national health but refusing to adequately address real issues of physical and mental disability in the community. We see here how rural idealism translates to middle-class desire for respectability and material wealth that will refute any claims—from within or abroad—of Irish inability. We see also the cost of this refusal to acknowledge social difficulties and the role of middle-class Irish nationalism in the deterioration of the community.

That mid-twentieth-century Irish literature finds Irish heroism and tragedy in its decolonizing effort is unsurprising—that the twenty-first century brings an equally curious meditation on the Easter Rising and the formation of Irishness forms the central concern of my fourth chapter. Beginning with Yeats's revivalist plays and poetry, I trace the development of Irish national ideals as they spring from a Gaelic tradition of blood sacrifice and heroic martyrdom. Yeats's initially ahistorical romanticizing of potential Irish victory prepares the way for twenty-first-century Irish epics that expose an Irish fight that wounds and disables the people as much as conquest does. An analysis of Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* and Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* reveals that Irish freedom is still in question as the question of Irishness is still largely unanswered. In unashamedly championing physically disabled and otherwise socially disenfranchised members of the Irish community, Doyle and O'Neill speak one hundred years after Yeats for the Irish revolutionaries who are rebellious in their very existence and who challenge not only their imperial oppressors but those Irishmen who would

refuse to recognize their place in the nation for which they are fighting. Doyle's and O'Neill's suggestion that the true heart of Ireland may indeed be lame, poor, dirty, uneducated, homosexual, anti-Catholic or otherwise outside the proclaimed bounds of official Irish character ultimately reminds us that the codification of nationality breeds social disability and indicts society's shameful identification of apparent deviancy with real disability.

As with any sense of Irish freedom, the final independence of the Irish Republic comes with a certain sense of inability—the island's partition physically and consistently points to fragmentation rather than wholeness, division rather than holistic development. My final chapter considers the community of Northern Ireland as it reflects larger political division and highlights the necessary sense of shame and guilt that results from British occupation of Irish territory and, in a sense, British purported ownership of Irishness itself. Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* and Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* present for our contemporary society an Ireland still suffering under imperial authority and unable to develop communal safety—of body or of spirit—because of national division and political strife. The very real violence that rocks today's Northern Ireland and the haunting presence of both IRA extremists and imperial authorities creates, these works contend, a Catholic community of mentally and emotionally disabled patriots unable to find satisfaction amidst competing ideologies. In contemporary Northern Ireland, perhaps even more than in the Dublin GPO of 1916, the constraints of nationalism loom large and threaten the individual soul with impossible demands. MacLaverty's and Deane's moving portrayals and the familial and individual secrecy they foreground fully illustrate the effect of national development upon individual ability, progression, and peace. As are the colonial and emergent national narratives of Ireland's greatest writers, theirs are tales of survival and of shame that highlight what a true disability political violence can be.

Chapter 2

Kavanagh/O'Brien: Spiritual Excess, Sexual Sterility

At fourteen years old, Caithleen Brady—heroine of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy*—expresses this most mature insight about Irish country life: “A stranger going along the road might have thought that ours was a happy farm; it seemed so, happy and rich and solid in the copper light of the warm evening. It was a red cut-stone house set among the trees and...it had a luster of its own, with fields rolling out from it in a flat, uninterrupted expanse of green.”¹⁴ At age sixty-five, Patrick Maguire—the despairing anti-hero of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*—represents the physically and emotionally crippling realities of Irish country life.¹⁵ The Brady farm, like Maguire's, is, of course, not happy. Caithleen rightly surmises that her family farm, and by connection her family's circumstances and degree of respectability, will be judged according to superficial ideals of pastoral beauty. The farm's idyllic façade hides, though, a multitude of abuses and dysfunction—Mr. Brady's alcoholism, Mrs. Brady's depression, the family's financial instability, and the Church's invisible stranglehold on the family's morale remain unseen by the passing stranger. Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* in many ways dramatizes Caithleen's imagined scenario and gives voice to the stranger who looks on from outside country-life values. In Kavanagh's poem, though, the stranger's intimate access to Maguire's thoughts allows a vision of country life unclouded by revivalist and nationalist notions grounded in myths of primitive genius and rustic simplicity. O'Brien and Kavanagh indeed both pen exposés of country life that reveal despair, ignorance, stagnation, and disability cultivated by insufferable physical conditions and spiritual surveillance. Most tellingly, O'Brien's and Kavanagh's characters are in-the-know. Unlike their counterparts, they question the scripts

national and religious authorities have written for them but are nonetheless unable to surmount their predetermined roles and achieve any degree of self-fulfillment. In both works, Irish paralysis and disability are reflected most clearly through sexual sterility that results from an obsession with morality and respectability. This connection undermines revivalist and Free State ideals of Irish purity as it exposes the impossibility of building actual Irish respectability amidst current narratives of forced provincialism.¹⁶

Irish ideals of respectability to which O'Brien's and Kavanagh's characters ascribe converge unquestionably with Catholic Church morality and obsessively emphasize physical sexual purity that supposedly breeds inner happiness and spiritual peace. These authors' works suggest, however, a breakdown in this translation. Caitheleen Brady and Patrick Maguire indeed experience a surprising degree of sexual inexperience, but they do so without a resultant feeling of happiness and fulfillment. Though both continually reaffirm belief in Catholic doctrine and rely on prayer despite their earthly misery, each meets a despairing and meaningless end. In this, O'Brien and Kavanagh assert that such excessive reliance on the unseen life does not preclude or make up for the emotional trauma this pursuit of perfection entails. Nor, these authors argue, does sexual purity and physical asceticism breed strength and ability for the Irish community. Rather, the country folk who rely only on these narratives wallow in an unproductive ignorance that is reflected in their physical inability or unwillingness to procreate and thus contribute to the perpetuation of their own communities. Alongside spiritual despair and conflict, their ignorance is always paramount—"O God," Maguire laments, "if I had been wiser!" (36). Caitheleen's journey to inner peace and outer success ends with neither—she is sterilized through a process that cuts away "some important region" she and those like her "knew nothing about" (508). Her ignorance, like Maguire's, cultivates an innocence the Irish national program would commend.

It breeds as well, these works suggest, contempt, regret, and disability the Irish Free State clearly does not foresee.

O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* and Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* speak out—twenty years apart—against the very same inadequacies of national and religious rhetoric that defined Irish response to imperial abuses and the ensuing national program of the Irish Free State and Irish Republic. Calling out to the faith of “our fathers” and securing woman’s place “within the home,” Eamon de Valera’s 1937 constitutional rewrite further enforced an Irish conservative ideology determined to showcase Irish national strength and moral superiority at the expense of the “light and imagination” that Yeats’s Revival envisioned and that Kavanagh would later find lacking in the Irish fields. Rejecting the cultural hybridity of pre-rebellion Ireland, revivalist Ireland and the Irish Free State embrace instead an ideal of power and independence defined by patriarchal strength and sexual purity enforced through psychological and physical submission to a thoroughly Catholic Ireland. “It is significant,” writes Antoinette Quinn, “that [*The Great Hunger*] should have appeared in 1941 during Fianna Fail’s wartime campaign to promote tillage farming and potato growing.”¹⁷ The poem, she asserts, is “an impassioned denunciation of [de Valera’s] rural Eden, a vision of a small-farm Ireland, stripped of all love, beauty, dignity and aspiration” (121). We can, in one sense, say the same of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Though O'Brien’s narrative leaves the farm behind and follows Caithleen to city life, her entrenched Irish-Catholic values remain the focal point of O'Brien’s critique. The initial scripting of these narratives amid the green expanse of the family farm reminds us always that the Irish nation has built a national image on reactionary rhetoric that privileges rural simplicity and earthly ignorance at the expense of individual liberation.

**“He thinks it is a potato” :
Great Hunger, Religious Fervor,
and Maguire’s Missing Marriage**

W.B. Yeats, in “The Celtic Element in Literature,” responds to Matthew Arnold’s influential description of Irish character as both irrational and melancholy with these words: “I do not think [Arnold] understood that our ‘natural magic’ is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her.”¹⁸ In what would become the standard rhetoric of the Irish Literary Revival, Yeats defends the modern Irish colonials as direct successors of an ancient Gaelic race transcendent in its superior imaginative and spiritual powers. This sensibility depends, Yeats suggests, on a direct and intimate connection to the land as epitomized by the Irish peasant. In merging these two aspects of Irish character, Yeats creates an enduring vision of the Irish farmer as a closeted poet brimming with ancient passions and eagerly awaiting the deserved deliverance and glorification of his people.

Regarding the definitive characterizations of Irishness expressed by Arnold and used frequently as a basis for British domination of its colonial subjects, Yeats asserts that none “of us who write about Ireland have built any argument upon them” (174). To the contrary, though, Yeats’s embracing of Arnold’s terms despite the attempt to subvert them validates questions of Irish inferiority as it creates an unattainable ideal upon which to build an independent Irish nation. Yeats does suggest that those who write about Ireland should “consider [these arguments] a little, and see where they are helpful and where they are hurtful” (174). In *The Great Hunger*, Patrick Kavanagh does just this. Without reservation, Kavanagh exposes the destructive power of Arnold’s narratives and, even more importantly, of the narratives of peasant exceptionalism espoused by Yeats and his troop of Revivalists. His critique goes further to suggest that in embracing these rhetorical models of an Irish sensibility defined through piety,

purity, and poetry, the Irish Free State has disabled its own potential for growth, progression, and stability. *The Great Hunger*, a seemingly small-scale examination of Patrick Maguire's particularity, rather exposes a large-scale erasure of Irish experience first by imperial myths of Irish inability, next by revivalist myths of peasant exceptionalism, and finally by Free State political and religious myths of Irish purity.¹⁹ Patrick Maguire represents the marginalized others of Free State idealism who, in the reality of their struggles, suggest an unmoving Ireland unable to progress toward the self-sufficiency and strength espoused by its official leaders.

Free State ideals of masculine strength, sexual purity, and romantic pastoral life give way in *The Great Hunger* to a portrait of the physically crippled, impotent, and sterile Irish farmer. Kavanagh, in a telling reference to Joyce, mocks the ideal Irish subject who has supposedly "[come] free from every net spread" (34). Rather, Patrick Maguire is fettered by a Free State mandate of sexual purity and the shackles of church and family that will supposedly signal light, prosperity, and development. That Kavanagh's poem—a searing vision of the mid-twentieth-century Irish farmer—was itself labeled obscene by the Irish secret police exposes the real disconnect between Free State idealism and the gross underdevelopment of the Irish both economically and spiritually. This underdevelopment is reflected most often through Kavanagh's emphasis on sexually disability which only underscores the impossibility of fruitful progression amidst Free State ideology. Importantly—as is the case with O'Brien's *The Country Girls* as well—sexual sterility in *The Great Hunger* is neither natural or unavoidable. Impotence and sterility are here self-inflicted through considerations of economic self-sufficiency and various measures of moral indoctrination. "Morality," Kavanagh notes, "yields / To sense—but not in little tillage fields" (42). In the cloistered world of rural Ireland, ideal images of spiritual purity are negated by an irrational adherence to moral constraints.

As harshly as Kavanagh's poem critiques the restraining grip of morality and religion, *The Great Hunger* as well implicates the land not in the peasant's reflection of glory but rather in his inability to achieve self-fulfillment. As it simultaneously sets the scene of Maguire's village and introduces the audience to a rural setting, the opening stanza as well clearly announces the poem's central tension. In it, the spiritual and imaginative passions of the Irish peasant—what Yeats calls "love of the Unseen Life," in "Ireland and the Arts"—are examined amidst the realities of rural routine, animalistic drudgery, and physical suffering. Kavanagh's opening line—"Clay is the word and clay is the flesh"—clearly recalls the Gospel of John but jettisons all spiritual concerns for a specific and purposeful emphasis on materiality. John's Gospel tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Gospel's invocation of this eternal union between the Word (Christ) and God (the Father) is theologically important because it suggests the primacy, beyond all temporal concepts, of spiritual salvation achieved through God's Incarnation and sacrifice. The Word is God, and, for Christians, the Word become flesh is the central mystery of faith and declaration of God's goodness. In Maguire's world, though, it is earth, not spirit, that is paramount. The clay—wet, heavy, dirty—offers the only salvation that will keep the farmer going. Likewise, the farmer's oneness with the clay is rather more stifling than liberating, reducing Maguire and his men to "mechanised scarecrows" who, we will see, live according to several scripts with which they cannot break. With this Biblical allusion, Kavanagh questions revivalist conceptions of peasant life as primarily spiritual. He also begins already, through this word play, to expose an Ireland rhetorically on message but actually unable to provide its people with the comforts it promises.

Yeats's championed Irish qualities—"love of the Unseen Life and love of country"—both cower next to Kavanagh's opening description. Maguire and his men represent a "broken-

backed” people bent over the “Book / Of Death” that demands their devotion to land, country and religion. The very physicality of the land—“Here crows gabble over worms and frogs”—and of Maguire’s suffering is juxtaposed with revivalist and nationalist ideals of the imaginative passions unveiled through the simplicity of rural life. “Is there,” the poet asks, “some light of imagination in these wet clods?” “What,” he continues, “is [Maguire] looking for” in the fields? The answer, Kavanagh maintains, reflects the successfully crippling hold of national and religious narratives of economic self-sufficiency without personal—especially sexual—fulfillment. “He thinks it is a potato,” the poet says, “but we know better.” Here, through his observer, Kavanagh implicates the audience in his critique of Maguire’s community and his way of life. A knowing audience that transcends Maguire’s mechanized routine, we expect that he seeks passion, comfort, and, at the very least, deliverance from suffering. In Maguire’s experience, though, we see that the peasant’s sole focus on the potato cultivates emotional blindness and spiritual emptiness. Despite narratives to the contrary, rural living and Church guidance clearly create a rural Irish nation rather more imprisoned than inspired. The more important question is, perhaps, “why do we stand here shivering?” (34). *The Great Hunger* suggests that the physical suffering the farmer endures is, in the end, all for nothing. Kavanagh’s persistent questioning of Irish narratives of acceptable behavior and sensibility is all the more poignant because he implies throughout *The Great Hunger* that Maguire himself suspects they are false. Maguire, Kavanagh notes, “pretend[s] to his soul” that he is benefitting from prescribed social roles. Though Maguire’s sense of imprisonment is important, even more so is his refusal to break free. *The Great Hunger* is replete with hesitations and regrets, moments in which Maguire recalls his path and wishes he’d chosen another. As much as it exposes the false narratives of the revival and the nationalism that succeeded it, *The Great Hunger* performs a

double exposure of the lies the Irish farmer has told himself. The “lie” is at the center of this poem—that Maguire “gloried in the lie” suggests the greater Irish nation is relying on an empty rhetoric of national success for its development (44).

Regarding the perpetuation of false narratives, Kavanagh’s choice of words is telling—Maguire, he says, “gloried in the lie” and “made it read the way it should” (44). Maguire’s life is subsumed, we see, by notions of what “should” be and how he “should” behave. In every description of country land and country life, Kavanagh returns to the Church’s omnipresent surveillance and the enforcing of moral codes. The land, he says, is “weighted with boulders like morality”—here, a sense of respectability and physical asceticism fences in Maguire and those like him (36). His mother’s “lie” that going to Mass and confessing his sins will give him “all the luck” further strengthens Kavanagh’s argument that the suffocation of personal desire is a learned behavior knowingly passed down through generations of Irish country farmers (42).²⁰ Maguire’s resentment particularly toward his mother clearly recalls the distorted relationship with “Mother Ireland” endorsed by Yeats and other Revivalists and suggests the mid-century persistence of such narratives of personal sacrifice. Maguire is trapped by social codes that refuse him any sense of financial or personal worth. He is doubly humiliated by his mother’s watchful eyes that have “stayed too long” to judge and subdue him (36).²¹

A devoted believer in family, farm, and Church, Maguire endures this imprisonment in the hopes that sexual abstinence and general self-denial reflect “necessary pain” for future salvation; it is important, though, that Maguire seems to suspect such denial of earthly pleasures is indeed “the rope that [is] strangling true love” (43). Maguire relies on prayer despite his suffering—he cries at night in his bed and yet “thank[s] the God who had arranged these things” (49). His reactionary spiritual fervor suggests that Maguire’s moments of doubt will never

develop into an ability to overcome his circumstance. He cannot forge an alternative path because he relies always for comfort on the very constraints that cause his suffering. The Church's redirection of his unhappiness toward a sense of the "Unseen Life" and an unearthly happiness is thoroughly critiqued by *The Great Hunger* as it unflinchingly presents moral codes and the demand for self-denial as lies perpetrated for an economic and material benefit that does not translate into emotional or spiritual well-being. Though Maguire laughingly insists his bachelorhood makes him "free from every net spread," this Joycean reference reminds us of the "masters"—one Roman and, now, one Irish—that still dictate individual ability and ultimately communal development.

"I am strongly of the opinion," Kavanagh himself states, that conditions in rural Ireland arise largely from "a moral—so-called—code that makes love and life impossible. If," he goes on to say, "the impulse for life was properly strong it would burst these so-called moral walls as it has done in the past and wherever society is healthy."²² In reflecting on County Monaghan, his birthplace, Kavanagh saw only "the sucking away of life, the very essence of men, till they are," like Maguire, "old and grey and full of sleep" (qtd in Warner 67). In this condemnation of falsely pious rural society, Kavanagh highlights a critical absence that is perhaps as important as the Church's too-strong presence. *The Great Hunger* takes as its subject the consequently weak "impulse for life" that Kavanagh sees in rural Ireland. Though we sense some passion in Maguire—he glimpses the divine in an evening "too beautifully perfect to use" and dreams of falling in love—his desire is always muted. "No," Kavanagh writes, "[is] in every sentence of [his] story" (45). The anemic life-blood of rural Ireland results, we are to believe, from the constant repression of desire and the self-taught denial of enjoyment. For this, critics agree, the Church is largely to blame. In "Virgin Queen or Hungry Fiend," Weldon Thornton rightly notes

that “the overall effect of Maguire’s religion is to suppress rather than to support his imaginative engagement with life.” His adherence to Catholic morality “leads him to disdain the tangible, immediate joys of life...in favor of looking always for something absolute and complete,” something beyond his earthly experience.²³ Likewise, in “The Apocalypse of Clay: Technique and Vision in *The Great Hunger*,” Augustine Martin claims that “the core of Maguire’s tragedy” is that “religion, instead of reinforcing the rage for life...inherent in these country people, has deflected that life-affirming energy into external religious observances, social dread, everything summed up in the word ‘Respectability.’”²⁴ Kavanagh clearly presents this critique through the paralysis Maguire exhibits in light of Church judgment of his actions. As Theo Veldhuis rightly notes in “Bound to the Soil,” Maguire’s “obsession with sin makes him shrink back from the promptings of his instinct and he clings for guidance to the traditional values of his society: religion and land.”²⁵ These supposedly liberating facets of Irish life—religion and land—present in *The Great Hunger* a debilitating combination of pressures that Maguire cannot surmount. Kavanagh’s description of spiritual life and religious practice among Maguire’s community always includes undertones of routine, stagnation, and misery connected to either religious indoctrination or the physicality of land and farm. That to which the people cling is clearly also that which weighs them down.²⁶

In describing and critiquing rural Irish society, *The Great Hunger* showcases an inextricable link between work and prayer that creates a community in which all forms of toil lead toward spiritual redemption. “The farm folk,” the poet tells us, “are hurrying to catch Mass: / Christ will meet them at the end of the world” (39). Section IV of the poem describes through a vivid tableaux the farmers’ devotion to religious ritual and to the land. Maguire simultaneously recites his prayers and ponders the development of his crops: “‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph pray for

us / Now and at the Hour.’ Heaven dazzled death. / ‘Wonder should I cross-plough that turnip-ground’” (39). That the congregation then coughs “in unison” reminds us that Maguire is representative of a community that shares his concerns. The physical exhaustion we sense as Maguire lethargically rises, “sprinkle[s] his face with holy water” and “rub[s] the dust off his knees” confirms the link we see throughout between physical toil and spiritual reward.

Maguire’s earthly routines are meant, it seems, to distract him from all temptations that would threaten his spiritual salvation. Kavanagh’s continual critique of this “lie” suggests, though, that religious intimidation and the threat of unearthly law is actually destroying Maguire’s spirit. He is unable to connect with other people—as evidenced largely by his refusal to engage in romantic pursuits—and thus grows old with an ever-growing resentment for all his rural “Eden” is supposed to offer. *The Great Hunger*’s final question clearly exhibits this disconnect between the rhetoric of salvation and the reality of spiritual vacuity. “Or is the earth right,” the poet wonders, “that laughs haw-haw / And does not believe / In an unearthly law” (55). Maguire’s tendency to always “[rush] beyond the thing / To the unreal” and see sin first before earthly connection leaves him “helpless,” stroking his cattle “in lieu of wife to handle” (39-40).

Maguire’s perpetual bachelorhood clearly haunts *The Great Hunger* and is the central symptom that reflects his larger condition of emotional, spiritual, and physical disappointment and disability. As, according to Martin, “the doctrines of salvation and grace, the sins of omission and commission...the mass, the sacraments...[and] the routines of religious observance...permeate the actions, failures, and hesitations” of Maguire’s community, so too does a palpable sense of routine and meaninglessness that seemingly pushes life forward though such routine actually impedes real progress. *The Great Hunger*’s most poignant words, I argue, are these: “The clock ticked on. Time passes” (41). This ultimate indictment of meaningless

ritual suggests an unchanging past and future that will continue to engender the kind of misery and ignorance Maguire exemplifies. Maguire's indifference to time's passing—"To-morrow is Wednesday—who cares?"—is well-noted by the stranger. We, like him, pity the waste of life Maguire represents. In an image that alludes to both Biblical notions of Paradise and Irish revivalist and nationalist characterizations of an idyllic pre-colonial Irish experience, Kavanagh asserts that Maguire "dare[s] not rise to pluck the fantasies / From the fruited Tree of Life. He bowed his head / And saw a wet weed twined about his toe" (40). Rather than looking up to the possibilities of knowledge and pleasure, Maguire—and by extension his fellow farmers—is always focused downward, his eyes on the land that sustains his physical existence without enhancing his experience of life. Kavanagh's reference to the "Tree of Life" recalls erroneous national rhetoric that would characterize rural Ireland as an Eden-like environment where oneness with the land suggests oneness with God and the perfection of humanity. Maguire's refusal to pluck this tree reinforces his crippling adherence to religious law and suggests that connection to the land yields ignorance rather than freedom. As Warner suggests, the "strongly anti-pastoral" tone of *The Great Hunger* "stress[es] the harshness of nature and the stunted lives of the labourers" (58). Physical toil and spiritual asceticism does not fulfill the Irish farmers; it deadens and desensitizes them.

Kavanagh's use of time in the poem—the back and forth temporal movement is punctuated by references to particular months and seasons—reminds us that nature's cycle of birth, development, and death goes on but also reinforces the stagnation of the farmers against the germination of their crops. Time passes, but nothing significant happens. Time passes, but Maguire only gets older without developing a sense of spiritual strength, emotional well-being, or physical comfort. In Maguire's Eden, human contact and human connection are prohibited.

Kavanagh most poignantly highlights the staying power of religious rhetoric in his mocking description of Maguire's experience of "life" after death:

If he stretches out a hand—a wet clod,
If he opens his nostrils—a dungy smell;
If he opens his eyes once in a million years—
Through a crack in the crust of the earth he may see a face nodding in
Or a woman's legs. Shut them again for that sight is sin. (54-55)

The poet's belief that images of sin and punishment will accompany Maguire to the afterlife also reflects Kavanagh's critique of Church doctrines that insist on earthly self-denial for the sake of eternal unearthly happiness. Even in death, it seems, Maguire cannot escape the rhetoric of individual moral failure. Even in death, Maguire cannot find enjoyment in the female body. The stranger rightly surmises that Maguire "will hardly remember that life happened to him" (55). This is true, of course, because Maguire has not experienced any kind of fulfillment. Nothing has happened to him. Despite persistent indoctrination by religious and national authorities on appropriate personal development, Maguire feels no sense of purpose. His physical and emotional state reflect instead an incomplete man whose insufficiencies represent an Irish nation clinging to narratives of wholeness despite a truly broken national experience. A century beyond the Great Hunger of the Famine, the now supposedly free Irish nation hungers for a sense of stability that does not rely on a restricting national image.

That *The Great Hunger* displays and critiques an overbearing national Church is beyond dispute; clearly, Kavanagh aims also to present a more realistic view of rural Ireland to balance the idealistic visions thrust upon the farmer's life by Irish Revivalists and controlling Irish politicians.²⁷ As much, though, as Kavanagh critiques representations of rural Ireland and the rhetoric of ascetic abstinence promulgated by the Church for economic gain, it is important to consider the real abuses Maguire suffers. While Veldhuis insists that *The Great Hunger* be

approached as “an attack on the misrepresentation of rural life in contemporary literature rather than on actual conditions,” I suggest in Kavanagh’s sardonic elevation of pastoral imagery and scathing critique of Catholic morality a greater concern with the lived experience of the Irish Free State and emergent Republic of Ireland as it is represented in and beyond Maguire’s community (282). In *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh’s emphasis on private experience—the critique of County Monaghan that we see, for example, in “Stony Grey Soil”²⁸—gives way to a publicly presentational and almost instructional tone of critique that wants urgently to communicate the miseries of Maguire’s environment. As John Redmond claims, in *The Great Hunger* “we find a subject that is deeply concerned with the public and external.”²⁹ Amid Kavanagh’s critique of more abstract rhetorical concerns, it is crucial to consider the prevalence in *The Great Hunger* of images of physical suffering, impotence, and disability. This emphasis, particularly on sexual dysfunction resulting from stifling narratives of respectability and morality, sets Kavanagh in line with a host of Irish writers who recognize Ireland’s self-inflicted social ills and physical disabilities. Maguire’s ultimate sterility and his mother’s role in this degeneration implicate the Irish nation in its own destruction.

Postcolonial and post-Famine economic conditions in rural Ireland certainly support the suggestion that farmers like Maguire suffered sexual and emotional underdevelopment for the desired benefit of the material stability represented by land ownership and familial cohesion. Maguire’s missing marriage reflects this economic reality as much as it does the Church’s staunch moral codes governing sexuality. Kavanagh’s emphasis on the brokenness of Maguire’s body, though, suggests that the presumed benefits of peasant life and earthly sacrifice do not justify the ills. As we’ve seen, the “light of imagination” supposedly culled through an ancient connection to land and spirit are replaced here with “shivering” and a sense of physical

deprivation (34). In perhaps the poem's most despairing description of peasant life, we see Maguire as "A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die" (53). While "The cows and horses breed, / And the potato-seed / Gives a bud and a root" (53), Maguire grows old without hope of regeneration or procreation. He remains a man only half-there in his experience of life and, in his old age, a man with "Life dried in [his] veins" (45). The notion that Maguire's experience is only half-lived recurs in the poem—in his sexual reverie, Maguire considers the "vague / Women" he envisions; Maguire's "love and fear" are only "half born to mind" (38). Maguire's life is rife with incompletions and regret. He feels this incompleteness most keenly in his sexual inability—Kavanagh defines Maguire by the "impotent worm on his thigh" (37) and the "no-target gun" that represents his purposeless masculinity. Importantly, Maguire's sterility is, like Caithleen Brady's of *The Country Girls*, self-inflicted. What life-blood he can offer is wasted over time through masturbation and half-conceived fantasies. His procreative potential "slip[s] between the bars" and falls "over the warm ashes" where it cannot produce (44, 48). Though it is interesting that Maguire allows himself this indulgence—hardly in line with prescribed self-denial—he does so only because "The law's long arm" cannot punish this "crime."³⁰ This constant reminder of his sinfulness as well serves to further subdue and restrain him. It increases his dependence on the Church for personal feelings of accomplishment and worth and perfectly illustrates an Irish community turned in upon itself, defined by disappointment, and unable to produce a life force to sustain its national plans. Life becomes dried in Maguire's veins because life stops with him. Though his "little fields may stay fertile" and subsist beyond Maguire's time, he leaves no children (35). Furthermore, *The Great Hunger* disavows its own assertion that "eunuchs can be men" in the fields (37). Though for a time the fields may lend comfort, Maguire's manhood is clearly wasted as is his potential to question or

subvert the many forces that have defined him. In the end, even Maguire's feeble attempts at pleasure "wake no manhood" (54). This physical impotence is mirrored in his life's failed trajectory. His inability to throw off the nets of mother, Church, and nation have sealed Maguire's fate—"O Christ!" he exclaims, "I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows for ever" (52). Maguire's horror at this prospect brings Kavanagh's critique full circle—the brokenness, disappointment, and isolation of Maguire's peasant life have left him decrying the very view of rural Ireland ironically championed by the nation itself.

In his misery, Maguire is the national anti-hero who can hopefully spur an appropriate revival of Irish passions. Unlike the Yeatsian poets of the Abbey, Maguire encounters a fate of regression and resentment. The "last curtain" of this rural Irish play sees no transformed Caithleen or heroic Cuchulain. In Maguire's story we see that an ideal oneness with the land realistically limits rather than liberates the actual Irish farmer. Thus, Kavanagh follows Maguire's realization of rural imprisonment with the poem's most clearly critical and sarcastic passage:

The world looks on
And talks of the peasant:
The peasant has no worries;
In his little lyrical fields
He ploughs and sows;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women,
He is his own master
As it was in the Beginning
The simpleness of peasant life.

Here, Kavanagh continues, the peasant, "who is only one remove from the beasts he drives," can "talk to God as Moses and Isaiah talked" (52). Kavanagh's Biblical allusions reiterate the false connection of spiritual chosenness to rural primitivism and enforce the finality of these scripts. "As it was in the Beginning," the peasant's life is (and ever shall be) defined by unrealistic

expectations of spiritual fulfillment in the face of actual suffering. Maguire's at times critical eye and ultimately unwavering acceptance of his conditions affirm this fatal diagnosis. Maguire, Kavanagh reminds us, "would have changed the circle if he could, / The circle that was the grass track where he ran" (40). Though Maguire "desperately broke the tune" of his life's only song, "always the same melody crept up from the background" to reinscribe him. Kavanagh's use of the circle tragically highlights Irish lack of progression. Development, as we see in Maguire, folds back always on itself and must conform to stifling narratives that allow no movement beyond a set path. In the end, Maguire is victim, it seems, to a predetermined track that overpowers his individual will and individual ability. Always paramount, of course, is the nation's role in creating this very track that binds its people. Kavanagh's lengthy sarcastic regurgitation of romantic nationalism's revivalist clichés reminds us that though colonial Ireland was victim, national Ireland is both victim and perpetrator. *The Great Hunger* reveals that master-slave narratives of colonial fiction have been replaced by enslaving master-narratives of Irish nationalism.

Romantic Nationalism and Sterile Romance in O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy*

In a 1996 interview, Edna O'Brien called Ireland "the last wound of British Imperialism."³¹ Though continually maligned as frivolous, romantic, and surprisingly apolitical, O'Brien reminds us in this one sweeping statement how impossible historical indifference is for an Ireland so steeped in colonial wounds. Though *The Country Girls*—O'Brien's first and most referenced work—is most cursed by criticisms of frivolity and sentimentality, the narrative it unfolds reflects the staying power of a disabling imperial rhetoric allegedly cast off with the end

of the Empire. O'Brien quite rightly notes Ireland's place as an inescapable reminder of a very violent and domineering imperial history. As important, though, is O'Brien's meditation on the destructive narratives of national strength and religious stability spawned in the wake of British imperial discourse. Though such limiting definitions of national character no doubt have roots in the very fight for self-definition necessitated by imperial abuses, their obsessive deliberation on national purity results, O'Brien suggests, from both a reliance on Catholic mandates of spiritual fitness and a desire to seize power and influence at the expense of those deemed weak or inferior. Like the Joycean prequels O'Brien references in her texts, *The Country Girls Trilogy* upholds Ireland as both perennial imperial victim and self-destructing national blunder. The Irish nationalism espoused by mid-century Ireland entraps O'Brien's "girls" much more securely than what seems a long forgotten history of colonial struggle. *The Country Girls Trilogy* suggests that "country girls" of the 1950s fall victim to competing narratives of strength and subservience as they encounter an Ireland rife with national fervor and religious excess. The very rhetoric intended to free an enslaved Ireland easily enslaves and disables the national citizens unable or unwilling to conform to new national standards.

Incessant criticism of O'Brien's place in the literary canon derives largely from popular readings of her first novel, *The Country Girls*. Though it would eventually headline a trilogy and epilogue that scathingly critique the treatment of women in the Irish Republic, the role of religion in stifling individual development, and the abuses of Irish nationalism, *The Country Girls* was first published alone in 1960 to a readership that focused exclusively on Caithleen's romantic pursuits and less than ambitious desires.³² *The Country Girls* chronicles Caithleen Brady and Baba Brennan's girlhood as they pass from rural country provinciality through the dark confines of a convent boarding school and out into the supposedly liberating liveliness of

Dublin. While Baba lends a practical and level-headed, though no less immature, voice to the tale, Caithleen's transition is spent pining for Mr. Gentleman, a married older man who lives amongst the poor country folk despite financial prosperity and a sophisticated foreign past. The subsequent novel, published first as *The Lonely Girl* and subsequently as *Girl with Green Eyes*, essentially repeats the plot of the first. Caithleen falls for another man—older, married, foreign. Eugene Gaillard renames Caithleen “Kate” and continually berates and torments her with racialized insults directed at her poor Irish past. By the novel's end, Kate recognizes Eugene's inhumane treatment but longs still for the day they will be equal in marriage. In the sarcastically titled *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, we find Kate and Baba both unhappily married with children. In this final novel, Kate's marriage ends with dramatic flair and she loses custody of her son. The novel ends with Kate's decision to have herself sterilized to avoid any future heartache. In an *Epilogue*, published in 1986, Baba informs us that Kate, like her mother, has drowned. In this case, it is more than likely that Kate has committed suicide. Kate and Baba's journey from fledgling Irish country maidens to jaded London women certainly invites an emphasis on romantic disillusionment and the perils of romantic desire. Despite these parallels, though, O'Brien's use of the romance plot even more drastically exposes the dangers of idealism, romanticism, and dependence on superficial markers of personal and national stability. In this way, Kate's story also parallels that of the nation that is constantly monitoring and judging her progress toward a “happy ending” in domestic bliss. Like the dreams and ideals of the fledgling Irish nation, Kate's journey becomes darker and more unmanageable as time goes on, ending inevitably with her suicide, a final grasp for the self-determining act that will relieve her misery. Her final end thus reflects the Irish nation's propensity to disable its own chances at productive

development. Most importantly, Kate's decision to have herself sterilized clearly suggests a self-defeating Irish nation that chooses stagnation rather than progression.

Of primary concern in O'Brien's novels is the role of woman in representing Irish national character and reflecting the Irish Republic's hierarchy of social and religious values. Through its study of the "country girl," *The Country Girls Trilogy* links nationalist rhetoric and de Valerian Free State ideology—both indebted to gendered narratives that continually contain and repress the "coming-of-age" Irish woman—to the underdevelopment and physically debilitating image of the so-called unfit national woman. The self-imposed sterility toward which O'Brien's "heroine" moves reflects the inability of the Irish woman to achieve productive development and exposes the physically disabling environment of mid-century Ireland. In her variation on the *bildungsroman*, O'Brien re-exposes the gendered narratives that create an Irish femininity unable to break free from the nationalist ideology that ensnares its women in the role of submissive national ideal and biological reproducers of this nation/narrative. Most significantly, O'Brien not only describes an oppressive Irish culture that impedes the social progress of its women but also reflects through her characters a psychological reliance on the very narratives that seek to contain them. Kate's undoing is, in many ways, her own. Her refusal to move beyond idealized narratives of romance, domesticity, and religious devotion signals only that she too can imagine no better fate for the Irish woman.

In perhaps a telling national parallel, Kate restricts her own development by succumbing to supposed truths without question and accepting a state of inferiority and dependence. As Rebecca Pelan notes in "Edna O'Brien's 'World of Nora Barnacle,'" O'Brien often considers "the disillusionment of women in society—not necessarily as victims of men's cruelty, but more often as victims of their own general social powerlessness." This impotence results, Pelan

writes, from “a society which has deprived [women] of every possible avenue of achievement other than one which involves serving the needs of others.”³³ Kate knows she is destined for only this kind of achievement, and both her domestic failures and fear of childbearing preclude any feelings of personal success. Foreshadowing her own fate, Kate—even before her pregnancy and marriage—“welcome[s] the fact that one day [she] would be old and dried” (336). The novel’s fearful and loathsome references to bodily concerns, sexual relations and progeneration clearly suggest a coming of age story in which development itself is to be feared. Beginning with mental illness and ending in self-sterilization and supposed suicide, O’Brien positions actual disability alongside a national narrative that portrays her heroine—appropriately named Caithleen, though known eventually as Kate—as incapable of successful development because she is female, poor, and sexually impure. Kate’s supposed incapacity for self-determination, then, seems to both derive from and lead to conditions of disability inflicted by an ideal image of the Irish nation.³⁴ The culmination of this narrative in physical sterility and death suggests also a culturally inscribed mechanism to reject deviance and stunt cultural development beyond ideologically entrenched narratives of acceptable individual and national progression.

That such staunch ideology and oppressive rhetoric emerge in the Ireland of Kate’s youth is not entirely surprising when we consider Irish nationalism as a symptom of the British imperial presence it was designed to overthrow. Predicated on notions of Irish exceptionalism, idealism, and moral superiority, Irish nationalism quickly becomes not only the moniker of Irish independence from imperial rule but also the defining feature of an Ireland intent on maintaining and propagating moral values at the expense of personal freedoms. Such concerns centered largely on moral issues and thus, as David Fitzpatrick ironically quips in *The Oxford History of*

Ireland, “Victorianism had its last and least predictable efflorescence in the country whose political rhetoric was most Anglophobic” (221). The Church hierarchy “rapidly achieved Catholic supremacy in the Free State despite the constitutional guarantees of religious liberty” and, one would expect, liberty from religious mandates (223). Thus despite its radical roots in colonial rebellion and violent civil war, the Irish Free State and ensuing Republic of Ireland offered its citizens much less than the liberating valence of freedom and development promised in the GPO corridors of the Easter Rising. As Terence Brown reminds us in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present*, “Pearse’s program for an independent Ireland...had envisaged an economic, social, and cultural flowering” that could scarcely be realized by the “economic stagnation” and “social and religious conservatism” of a “highly homogeneous, essentially rural society” (33). Though *The Country Girls Trilogy* is set three decades after the inception of the Irish Free State, O’Brien’s novels epitomize through Kate and Baba’s country community the highly conservative and morally stringent Irish society of which Brown speaks. This rural majority wields as well the overwhelming power of Catholic authority and its ability to outcast and label those who fall short of its expectations. As Brown notes, the composition of the Irish Free State, after the exclusion of the six northern counties, left an open field for “the Catholic nationalist majority to express its social and cultural will unimpeded by significant opposition from powerful minorities” (17). Thus, rather than offering freedom from tyranny and social limitation, a newly free Ireland had no need for the diversity an ideal Irish nationalism had imagined.

As demonstrated through various forms of censorship and prohibition in the decades following Irish independence, “Irish repressiveness,” Brown notes, “severely stunted the cultural and social development of a country which protracted colonial mismanagement had left in

desperate need of revival” (34). In perhaps the most telling scene of national surveillance in O’Brien’s *The Lonely Girl*, Kate experiences with horror the repressive arm of an Irish Catholic nationalism that stifles as it intends to liberate. When Kate’s father and his drunken neighbors get word of Kate’s supposed indiscretions, they travel—angry mob style—to Eugene’s home in an effort to save her from the foreign man supposedly corrupting her innocent nature. Terrified more of the mob than of Eugene, with whom she is hopelessly infatuated, Kate is forced to hide under the bed and listen helplessly as “they [sit] there deciding [her] life” (296). In this poignant scene, both the outsider—Eugene is foreign, wealthy, and decidedly not Catholic—and the Irish mob believe they are protecting Kate from the other. While Eugene attempts a logical resolution to the situation, Kate’s father can do nothing more than attack Eugene’s character on the basis of religious devotion: “Do you go to Mass or don’t you?” he asks. “D’you eat meat on Fridays?” In this scene, O’Brien does the seemingly impossible—in her description of the provincial mob come to drag Kate back to the cave of religious subservience, O’Brien elicits sympathy for Eugene, the domineering and abusive older man Kate clings to without any real hope of actual respect or affection.

Though his attacks on Kate’s Irish country upbringing have disgusted readers thus far, Eugene’s brand of “imperial” rhetoric suddenly seems warranted in the face of Ireland’s own desire to oppress its people through religious indoctrination. Kate, Eugene tells the mob, “is running away from you and your way of living.” Unable to understand Eugene’s taunt, Jack Holland responds quite irrelevantly that “the tragic history of our fair land” is that “alien power sapped our will to resist” (297). Despite its supposed primacy in the deciding of Kate’s fate, her community, Eugene insists, cannot force her to go—“not even in Ireland” (299). Andy’s response is most telling—“Can’t we?” he asks. “We won our fight for freedom. It’s our country

now” (300). That O’Brien combines the mob’s insistence on religious piety, desire for Kate’s submission, and proprietary wielding of national independence suggests at work in the Irish Republic the debilitating forces of Irish nationalism that haunt the Free State’s development from its inception. A history of oppression and powerlessness has clearly created in this rural Irish mob a desire to seize control and execute authority at any cost including the oppression of its own people. That Kate’s father suggests they can have her “put away” as “mental” because she does not wholly share their moral values or reflect a proper national viewpoint highlights Irish eagerness to sequester and label as unfit any part of its society that does not contribute to the ideal national image.³⁵

Kate’s ambivalence toward marriage, sex, childbearing, and motherhood reflects throughout the novels her reluctant desire to uphold this national image she feels instinctually is designed to stifle and disappoint her. Her role as biological reproducer of national greatness haunts Kate from her youngest days, and her mother’s quest for domestic perfection despite its crippling emotional effects inspires Kate to replicate the family unit though she innately fears the horrors of perpetuating it. Throughout *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O’Brien intertwines domesticity, disability, and dispossession to reflect the pressure Irish women feel to contribute to a social system that demeans and disempowers them. As Lisa Colletta and Maureen O’Connor argue in their “Introduction” to *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O’Brien*, O’Brien’s fiction insists on the link between “domestic and political colonization and between obsessions about the control of land and the control of women.”³⁶ For O’Brien, they say, “Ireland is not an old sow that eats her farrow but...a woman who has been raped by various enemies” (8). As perennial symbol of the nation, Caitheleen witnesses and experiences the metaphorical raping of women at the hands of men eager to control and belittle them. Though much criticism of *The*

Country Girls Trilogy focuses on Kate's idealization of her mother, it is as important to note her mother's role in exposing marriage and domesticity for the charade she believes it to be. Though Pelan insists in "Edna O'Brien's 'Love Objects'" that O'Brien's mothers "are primarily responsible for programming daughters into a narrow-minded world of subjugation and imprisonment,"³⁷ Kate's mother desires for Kate a life that will not mirror her own. O'Brien's critique comes rather through the limited alternatives Kate's circumstances can offer—Kate's mother at least suggests that Kate enter the convent. "It was," her mother thinks, "better than marrying. Anything was" (67). With her narrow vision of a liberating escape from domestic imprisonment, Kate's mother can only suggest imprisonment and subjugation by Church authority and a life even more fully defined by the suppression of female desire and development.

Kate's adulthood is haunted—with both pleasant nostalgia and with horrified revulsion—by images of domesticity her mother represents. Kate is coming of age, we should note, under an Irish Republic licensed by Eamon de Valera's 1937 Constitution to relegate women to the domestic realm where they can best create and maintain an Irish national image of respectability and moral aptitude. As Pelan notes, the "reality for many Irish women, particularly those in rural areas," was "exclusion from every aspect of public life...trapping them in a domestic sphere." This state sanctioned bigotry shows, Pelan argues, that "the response to one colonial regime produced nothing more than a form of social imperialism in which women paid the highest price" ("Nora" 51). Kate's memory of her mother's domestic role includes especially terrifying remembrances of her mother's necessary sexual submission. She remembers seeing her mother "on the pillow beside [her father]. Reluctant and frightened as if something terrible were being done to her." Her mother, she says "used to sleep with me as often as she could and only went

across to his room when he made her” (50). Kate ultimately first experiences sex with Eugene who has “for days” told her “to persuade [herself] that [she] was not afraid.” As Kate passes “inescapably—into womanhood,” she feels “no pleasure, just some strange satisfaction that [she has] done what [she] was born to do” (316).

Despite her fears of motherhood and Eugene’s assurance that they will not have babies, Kate clearly links her newfound state of “real” womanhood with domesticity and the demands of childrearing.³⁸ Before the bedroom scene ends, Kate’s mind drifts to thinking of how her mother “used to blow on hot soup before she gave it to [Kate,] and of the rubber bands she put inside the turndown of [Kate’s] ankle socks, to keep them from falling” (317). Her decision to have sex with Eugene has thus, in her mind, already begun a process of self-sacrifice that must continue as she enters adulthood and becomes valuable only in her ability to provide for others. Kate’s desire to bind herself to Eugene and fulfill the role her mother so willfully disdained reflects the power with which this traditional narrative inflects Kate’s worldview. It recalls too—as Kristine Byron notes in “‘In the Name of the Mother...’: Reading and Revision in Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*”—the common demands of the “female romance plot” in which “the heroine can only realize her potential as woman through marriage and childbearing.” As Byron rightly insists, though, such an “idealized vision of motherhood is dismantled” in O’Brien’s *Trilogy*.³⁹ It is important to note, however, that O’Brien’s critique comes not only through Kate’s inability to fulfill her intended role but also through Kate’s recurring desire to attain the ideal domestic wholeness she so often shuns and tries to subvert.

Through Kate’s initial reliance on traditional narratives of familial dependence and security, *The Country Girls Trilogy* certainly reflects the de Valerian image of Irish domesticity proffered in the 1937 Constitution. Despite controversy, de Valera himself noted that the

Constitution makes it “quite clear that in our view the fundamental group of the State—in a sense the most important group of the State—is the family.” Beyond “religious teaching,” he goes on to say, “I would propose here that we should not sanction divorce. Therefore no law can be passed providing for divorce.”⁴⁰ Combined with Ireland’s 1935 prohibition of artificial contraception and the 1937 Constitution’s insistence upon a female’s place in the home, this de Valerian view of marriage left little escape for women, like Kate’s mother and later Kate herself, who obligingly perform wifely duties without the prospect of self-development or actualization. De Valera’s desire to prevent any circumstance that “compels mothers to leave their natural duties as mothers” (325) and abuses the “inadequate strength of women” (326) reflects an Irish nation’s desire to perpetuate a portrayal of women that limits, confines, and disables them. *The Country Girls Trilogy* and the national rhetoric its tragedies reflect undermine de Valera’s assertion that such constitutional statements about the role of women refer only to mothers and that there is “no use in bringing into this context young girls and people who are not married” (324). In his own assessment, de Valera seems to have missed the point that the role of young girls and unmarried women is judged and determined according to their ability to fulfill this desired ideal. Similarly, de Valera states in the Constitution’s defense that married women, “by the very fact that they are married and have undertaken those duties[,] may be assumed to have a preference for performing those home duties” and wish not to labor outside the home (324).

As *The Country Girls Trilogy* and Ireland’s clearly gendered national image illustrate, women of mid-century Ireland “mature” into predetermined roles that leave no room for development outside these particular parameters. In the 532 pages of the *Trilogy*, O’Brien refers explicitly to de Valera only once. As Jack Holland grasps wolf-like for young Kate’s and Baba’s affections and patronizes them with tales of his own power and manliness, Kate thinks



THE UNWISE PIG.

ERIN. "SHURE, IT'S A DEAL OF TROUBLE YOU WERE AFTER MAKING FOR EVERYONE WHEN YOU SPELT THAT NAME."

sarcastically about his actual inability to effectively take charge of a situation—“Jack had been in charge,” she remembers, “the night of the concert when the town hall went on fire; Jack was in charge of the lorry that De Valera nearly fell through during an election speech” (20). In this scene, Jack asks only for kisses from the teenage girls. Later, after the death of Kate’s mother, Jack takes over Kate’s family home and leverages it to get Kate to marry him. It is significant that O’Brien references de Valera in this context—unlike the two foreign men who will later manipulate and abuse Kate’s innocence, Jack Holland is the only Irish man who desires clearly to benefit himself financially, socially, and sexually at the expense of Irish women. Kate remembers her mother enduring Jack’s physical molestations because “he was decent to her, with presents of candied peel and chocolate” (14). Coupled with O’Brien’s reference to de Valera, Kate’s clear association of Jack Holland with unwanted sexual overtures and mock sympathy for her family’s plight further enhances O’Brien’s critique of Ireland’s de Valerian program of upholding womanly virtue as a national ideal while encouraging a national image of strength predicated on the submission of women.

De Valera’s desire to defend this willful repression of women for the betterment of a morally and socially conservative nation parallels quite clearly the national Church’s desire to suppress religious difference and individual morality despite claims of liberation. Through Kate’s perspective in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O’Brien never strays far from her critique of an Irish nationalism built upon the triangulated strength of religious piety, moral perfection, and domestic efficiency. *The Country Girls* begins with a specific meditation on how these three demands of proper Irish womanhood affect Kate’s daily life even at the age of fourteen. As a young girl acting in her mother’s image, Kate is clearly defined by her family’s poverty, by her mother’s desire to surmount the image of poverty and create an aura of respectability, and by an

all-encompassing dependence on penance and prayer. Kate tells us quite flippantly that she habitually gets out of bed “six or seven times every night as an act of penance” because she is “afraid of hell” (4). When the novel begins, Kate has just awakened anxiously with the knowledge that her drunken father had not come home the night before. Her morning routine is filled, we see, with alternating concerns about the imminent and alarming reappearance of her father and the appearance, or image, of the family home. Before getting out of bed, Kate “smooth[es] the green satin bedspread” that she and her mother had “forgotten to fold” the night before (3). Kate’s ritual suggests her mother’s concern for appearances amidst their poverty and familial dysfunction. Feeling the cold floor, Kate notes that she owns slippers but that “Mama made [her] save them for when [she] was visiting [her] aunts and cousins.” Likewise, the family has rugs “rolled up and kept in drawers until visitors came in the summertime from Dublin” (3). O’Brien emphasizes in this opening description of Kate’s family and home that everything in the Brady household is “either broken or not used” (5). As Kate recalls the many previous times her father has stumbled home mid-morning with drunken excuses for his absence, O’Brien juxtaposes the desired image of wholeness and respectability with the realities of Kate’s “broken” home. In another poignant juxtaposition, Kate emerges from her poverty-stricken home to feel “that rush of freedom and pleasure” incited by “the fields very green and very peaceful” (7). In this descriptive mismatch, O’Brien ironically presents the real dysfunction and unhappiness beneath the peaceful and inspiring image of the Irish countryside upon which Irish idealism is largely based.

The Country Girls Trilogy exposes repeatedly the disconnect between ideal images of rural Ireland and the realities of familial and personal disability engendered by these narratives. In Kate’s mother, O’Brien encapsulates the Irish mother self-sacrificial to an almost ridiculous

degree. After a sleepless night of awaiting her husband's drunken return, Kate's mother attests that she stayed awake "just in case" Kate choked on the candy she had fallen asleep eating. Kate's mother, we quickly learn, deflects attention from her less than ideal marriage with over-attention to her role as protective mother and keeper of the home. Her imprisonment in the marriage union is noted by Kate who finds it "hard to think that [her mother] got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and...that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears" (9). Kate will herself replicate this devolution of personal ambition when she fails to find happiness in her marriage with Eugene. In this first chapter that introduces the issues that will plague Kate through childhood into a miserable adulthood, O'Brien weaves an intricate connection between Kate's mother's unhappiness, Kate's desire to assuage guilt and misery through religious penance, and the underlying presence always of physical sickness, discomfort, and deterioration. Kate notes that her mother "always coughed when she lay down" (6) and that Kate herself has a "bad chest" (9). Considering her mother's chronic illness and her father's violent nature, Kate sets off for school "in fear and trembling," always afraid her mother will die while she's at school (9). As she takes a final glance at the family home, "terrified that Dada would appear any minute," Kate tellingly remembers that "the Tans burned the big house" and thus her father, "unlike his forebears, had no pride in land" (10). Thus, through Kate's contemplations of her home and family, O'Brien suggests that mid-century rural Ireland suffers not only from the effects of imperial subjugation and civil war but also from its own inability to achieve the self-sufficiency and liberation Irish nationalism promised.⁴² Kate's mother's physical ailments and the eventual suspicion, after her death, of mental illness and moral impropriety reflect an Irish nation crippled by its own desire for success and unable to uphold its own national tenets. That Kate emulates her mother's domestic pursuits and herself faces mental

illness and a premature death suggests that Ireland's desire for stability has cultivated rather an ongoing pattern of instability.

Through the figure of Kate's mother, O'Brien effectively ties such a burden of domestic success and stability to familial life and the role of women in maintaining Irish respectability. That the Brady family's few material possessions are worthless and their familial ties are strained is immaterial. Kate's mother teaches the importance of domestic tranquility through her concern with the family's image and her acceptance of Jake Holland's advances. Certainly, as critics agree, the role of Kate's mother is essential in shaping the ways in which Kate perceives her role as woman and her ability to develop beyond the immature state in which we first encounter her. That her mother dies unexpectedly when Kate is only fourteen complicates Kate's ability to properly process and evaluate her childhood—nostalgia for her childhood, and specifically a longing for her mother, consumes Kate throughout her adult life. We must consider, however, that Kate's nostalgia centers as often on an ideal image of Ireland as it does on an idealization of her mother. That Kate cannot clearly separate these two forces is quite significant. Amanda Greenwood asserts in her study of the *Trilogy* that Kate's need to reminisce about and connect with her Irish country past "signifies the necessity for returning to and reassimilating childhood memory...if the female subject is to reconcile the disparate elements of her fractured identity."⁴³ Greenwood does not, however, account for Kate's ultimate inability to reconcile past trauma with any sense of a fulfilling future. Kate's nostalgia, though providing relief at times, only encourages a sense of loss, desperation, and futility. This fruitless sentimentality is in fact repeatedly critiqued—first by the nuns at Kate's convent school, then by her Dublin "landlord" Joanna, and ultimately by her husband Eugene. Eugene, arguably the most abusive force in Kate's life, insists that "sentimentality will get [her] nowhere" (313). Eugene, the novels'

powerful encapsulation of foreign practicality and masculine dominance, is quite right. The lulling memories of the Irish countryside only lure Kate toward depression, loneliness, and death.

That Kate can expect a miserable and unproductive future is suggested by the *Trilogy's* constant triangulation of Kate's longing for home, Kate's perpetual mourning of her mother, and, most importantly, the connection of these two forces through the identification of Kate's mother with a romanticized image of rural Ireland. Ironically, Greenwood asserts both that O'Brien's fiction "manages within the social and cultural contexts of the 1960s to transcend nationality" and that "'gender' and 'nation' are conceptually linked throughout [O'Brien's] work" (32). That O'Brien links gender and nation is seen clearly in her description of Kate and most poignantly through the perception of Kate by her foreign suitors. What Greenwood does not consider, however, is the role of Irish nationalism in shaping this gender/nation link. Kate and her mother are linked explicitly with an ideal image of rural Ireland because they, as Irish women, must represent and reflect the moral sentiment upon which the Irish nation is based. That Kate's mother and Kate herself ultimately meet premature deaths under the suspicion of suicide confirms O'Brien's critique of a national program that burdens its women with creating and upholding impossible moral and domestic standards. In her analysis of O'Brien, Mary Salmon rightly suggests that O'Brien repeatedly critiques Irish social roles through her characters' beliefs that "they are capable of realizing undivided selfhood" only in "death, or its surrogates: madness or imprisonment."⁴⁴ Kate's mother finds relief from a life of domestic anxiety only in death—because she is too young to understand the complexities of her mother's responsibilities, Kate takes up the burden of familial respectability and strives against her own desires to replicate her mother's "domestic tradition" (O'Brien 81). Kate's fond remembrances of familial safety are linked always to both her mother's nurturing ways and the physical land of her familial home.

Indeed as we have seen, the de Valerian Ireland which Kate inhabits confirms that in imitating her mother's womanhood, Kate as well accepts an Irishness that reinforces feminine submission to patriarchal and religious authority. Though the course of Kate's life allows her to be spared the "commonplace sacrifice" that was her mother's life—"her with one shoulder permanently dropping from carrying buckets of hen food...her keeping bars of chocolate under the bolster so that I could eat them in bed if I got frightened of Dada"—Kate's life is sacrificed as well (203). Though she can, through voluntary sterility, prevent her own consumption by the proscribed role of motherhood, Kate is not allowed fulfillment beyond it.

O'Brien's *Trilogy* in a sense charts Kate's development along a spectrum of acceptable behavior and desire. Though she eventually attempts to shun her rural community's care and the Church's stifling surveillance, Kate approaches Dublin life with a backward-looking desire to assuage her loneliness by remembering the supposed comforts of home. Though Kate and Baba have just desperately escaped a life of religious instruction and incessant Church authority, Kate finds "a special comfort" in the toll of Church bells as she and Baba navigate the "all too strange" streets of the city (123). Kate's desire to immerse herself in the comfort of religious ritual reflects a common ambivalence shown by rural immigrants to the city and Dublin's specifically Irish representation of modern city life. As Brown records, by 1951 almost one-third of Dublin's population had been born "outside the city's county bounds" (167). By the 1950s, Dublin had indeed become a very modern industrialized city center, but, as Brown again highlights, "what surprisingly did not occur in Dublin was that swift secularization which has frequently been identified with the growth of urban life elsewhere" (168). Rather, as O'Brien's characterization of Kate's immigration attests, "Catholic belief and practice still dominated daily life" in Dublin and "the sense of the crucial role of the family in society survived the transition

from country to city” (169). This surprising adaptation confirms both the Catholic dominance of the national image and Kate’s inability to imagine a life beyond her prescribed role. The persistence of Catholic practice in Dublin also reflects the Irish woman’s inability to escape the communal surveillance that insists on certain moral values and idealizes Irish character through the behavior of Irish women. Though Brown rightly notes that the centrality of community and religion in Dublin “made the process of urbanization less painful...than it might have been,” the predominance of this value system certainly, O’Brien suggests, makes the process of maturation and development much more confusing and difficult. For Kate, the city clearly offers no escape from the oppression of rural Irish national expectations.

As she adjusts to city life, Kate’s constant nostalgia for home—despite her family’s financial, social, and moral ruin—highlights her inability to separate an ideal image of rural tranquility and domestic perfection from the very real failure her family represents. After suggesting on their first night in Dublin that she and Baba should go to confession—as they “usually did on Saturday evenings”—Kate covers her discomfort at Baba’s irreverence by daydreaming of home; she thinks first of “all our Sunday dinners at home” and then “of lambs being born in the cold and in the dark, of sheep farmers trudging down across the hills, and...of the shepherds and their dogs stretching out in front of the fire” (128-130). Her romanticization of both familial happiness and rural living continues throughout her life in Dublin though Kate asserts a perhaps rebellious love of the city. Experiencing her first night in the “neon fairyland of Dublin,” Kate insists she “loved it more than [she] had ever loved a summer’s day in a hayfield.” That her description of the chaotic loveliness includes a “dark-faced woman in an orange silk thing” (131) suggests Kate’s immediate desire to transcend the locality of her provincial life and experience a modern world beyond the scope of immediate national and

traditional concerns. She and Baba take in their surroundings with an exoticizing gaze, eager to escape their past but suspiciously unable to reject their natural place as Irish Catholic “country girls.” Quite soon after she embraces the “crowds and lights and noise” (132) of the city, Kate finds herself dreaming of “bog water...bog lilies...blackened patches of ground...and the great limestone ridges that rose out of the brown and purple earth.” Kate remembers “a belt of poplar trees, shutting out the world...[she] wanted to escape into” and realizes insightfully that having finally “come into the world, that scene of bogs and those country faces [are] uppermost in [her] thoughts” (137). The primacy of these images is related, though, to her longing for Mr. Gentleman who she hopes will “suddenly appear out of nowhere and steer [her] through the strange, long, sweet night” (136). Kate’s reliance on the memory of Mr. Gentleman’s affections complicates her view of the rural life she has left and confirms her sense of innocence and powerlessness. Through Mr. Gentleman—like his successor Eugene—O’Brien suggests not only that Irish womanhood is defined by the patriarchal limits of Irish nationalism but also that Irish character itself is still defined through an imperial and continental gaze.

Young Kate, as we see in *The Country Girls*, is burdened by religious and familial responsibility from which she seeks comfort and escape through the affections of older, foreign suitors. On the day of her first outing with Mr. Gentleman, Kate notes her only three wishes—“that Mama was in heaven, that [her] father would never drink again, and that Mr. Gentleman would not forget to come at one o’clock” (54). O’Brien suggests through these three wishes that Kate defines her hopes by Catholic spirituality and desires, in her current state, to escape her father’s brand of domestic ruin by clinging to a romanticized vision of life beyond the provincial bounds of her country community. Though he is part of this space, Mr. Gentleman clearly represents a continental influence—he is French and his “real name was Mr. de Maurier, but no

one could pronounce it properly” (12)—and Kate’s infatuation with him suggests that only an outsider can save her from the future she can expect in the Irish countryside. In Mr. Gentleman, Kate sees a sophistication and elegance that highlights her own family’s failures. Her romantic reverie begins, in fact, when her father sends her to Mr. Gentleman to borrow money, suggesting to Kate that her family’s financial well-being depends on the generosity of foreign influence. Immediately after her encounter with Mr. Gentleman, Kate daydreams about a life with him: “to drink elegant glasses of sherry; to play chess, to eat soufflés and roast venison,” she thinks whimsically. This fantasy is fittingly interrupted by Jack Holland’s suggestion that “many Irish people are royalty and unaware of it. There are kings and queens,” he says, “walking the roads of Ireland...totally unaware of their great heredity” (13). In juxtaposing Kate’s description of Mr. Gentleman with Jack Holland’s Celtic mythologizing, O’Brien reenacts a standard narrative of Irish colonial history.⁴⁵

Against Mr. Gentleman’s actual wealth and respectability, Jack Holland represents an Irish community clinging to an imagined past that confirms some kind of superior Irish sentiment. That Kate is bored by Jack Holland’s musings suggests the actual futility of this nationalist rhetoric. She prefers, instead, to gain Mr. Gentleman’s affections and quickly entrusts him with her hopes for a fulfilling future. Kate’s deference to Mr. Gentleman and her unwavering belief in his ability to save her coexist, we must note, with her innate realization that he approaches her from a position of power and inequality. Kate notes that his smile is “very condescending” (12) and that there is a “certain slyness” about it (13). When he later expresses more affection, his gentle touch is opposed always by his “fiercely expectant” eyes (89). Mr. Gentleman in fact grooms Kate for his own sexual satisfaction, and though Kate is aware of his manipulation, she endures it because he alone can inflate her self-worth. Kate’s interactions with

Mr. Gentleman consistently display her innocence and highlight her youthfulness against the knowingness of his desires. Kate feigns maturity at their first lunch together though she finds the wine and coffee bitter. That Mr. Gentleman laughs when a film makes Kate cry—she is absorbed in the romantic sentiment of a man going off to war; he is thinking of no such romantic gesture—reinforces our understanding that Mr. Gentleman enjoys his power over Kate and is only appeasing her immaturity to gain her trust (56).

Though we can quite rightly infer O'Brien's comment here on Kate's youth and recognize in Kate's journey the familiar plot of unrequited romance, the specific inequality and manipulation at issue in Kate's relationship with Mr. Gentleman suggests O'Brien's larger critique of imperial subjugation and the necessary belittling of Irish character that attends it. Kate's infatuation with Mr. Gentleman—and later Eugene—despite their patronizing and abusive attitudes toward her and her Irish background clearly reflects a pattern of Irish instability and inequality exacerbated by a fraudulent "Union" with British imperial forces. As Mary Jean Corbett quite poignantly notes in *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870*, "domestic plots do ideological work" (12). Furthermore, Corbett writes, "in the English-Irish context, gender provides perhaps the most fundamental and enduring discursive means for signifying Irish political incapacity, as in the English typing of Ireland as an alternately dependent or unruly...wife" (16). That Corbett's analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth-century writings applies aptly to O'Brien's mid-twentieth century *Trilogy* only confirms that the stain of imperial oppression and, more importantly, type-casting of Irish ability far outlasts the political hold of the British Empire. Mr. Gentleman's manipulation of Kate—who is not only ethnically Irish but is also coded specifically according to imperial and national Irish stereotypes—confirms an ongoing sense of Irish disability, dependence, and inferiority. As their first outing shows, Mr.

Gentleman in fact represents for Kate a glamour that saves her from a life of Irish stew, “the cheapest thing on the menu” (55).

The promised grandeur of a life with Mr. Gentleman does not, however, come with any hope of equality or mutual respect. Unlike Kate—described consistently by her foreign suitors as too emotional, sentimental, and nostalgic—Mr. Gentleman, Kate knows, is “detached” and lives as if “he had lemon juice instead of blood under his skin” (166). In the face of his emotional equanimity, Kate eventually begs “in [her] mind” for him to “have more feeling” (95). Rather than mirroring her excess of emotion, though, Mr. Gentleman presents himself as a calculating man who derives pleasure from both Kate’s submission to him and her ignorance of adult relationships—Mr. Gentleman instructs Kate not to wear lipstick when they meet because he prefers her without it; Kate notices at one point that Mr. Gentleman’s eyes “dwelt on [her legs] for a while as if he were planning something in his mind” (87). Though these plans are not quite realized sexually, Mr. Gentleman’s sexual education of Kate clearly influences her later responses to Eugene and her view of womanhood as a necessary suppression of one’s sexual fears. Kate rightly notes in the drawing room scene that the “end of [her] innocence is near” (162). Her admission that this sexual energy makes her feel “excited, and warm, and violent” suggests a transition from innocence that necessarily introduces an adult world of anger and disappointment. Kate’s sexual experiences will bear out this initial response by forcing on her the role of wife and mother she does not want and is ultimately unable to fulfill. At the point of Kate’s sexual initiation in the Dublin drawing room, O’Brien reclaims Kate as a specifically Irish heroine and reminds us of the controlling Mr. Gentleman’s desire to exoticize her “native” qualities. Thus, as Greenwood argues, “the boundaries between national and sexual colonization are blurred.”⁴⁶ Mr. Gentleman, of decidedly foreign influence, brushes off Kate’s childish

comments and buries his face in the “country-colored hair” of his “country girl” (165). Kate as well internalizes Mr. Gentleman’s patronizing attitude toward her; when Mr. Gentleman whispers her name “in that way,” she hears “the bulrushes sighing...and all the lonesome sounds of Ireland” (163). Mr. Gentleman’s outside influence makes Kate feel most Irish, a racial identification that only makes her more vulnerable to Mr. Gentleman’s manipulation.⁴⁷ Kate exemplifies O’Brien’s Irish heroines who, as Salmon argues, “hand themselves over to husband-guardians from outside in a so-called act of rebellion.”⁴⁸ By rebelling against her country roots and the provincial demands of her father—supported as he is by Church authority and a stringent rural nationalism—Kate in fact cannot escape the definitions forced on her by social ideas of appropriate femininity.

Through the role of Kate’s rural community and the Church authority that accompanies its attempted manipulation of her life choices, O’Brien critiques the accepted view of Church influence in Irish society and exposes the power of this belief to impact even those who seem to question its validity. Having managed to somewhat eschew her Catholic morality, Kate indeed cannot be rid of the powerful influence of patriarchal and religious authority on her proposed path. At the end of *The Country Girls*, Kate is left waiting for Mr. Gentleman who has promised to take her to Vienna—a space that represents romance for Kate and, clearly, freedom from Irish tyranny for the “fiercely expectant” Mr. Gentleman. He plans, he tells Kate, to consummate their affair once they can “go away to the right atmosphere” (163). Mr. Gentleman never arrives—“EVERYTHING,” his telegram says, has “GONE WRONG.” Most importantly for our analysis, “THREATS FROM [KATE’S] FATHER” prevent Mr. Gentleman from meeting Kate and thus keep, for the moment, her Irish virtue intact. In this scene, Kate’s father stands in for a larger community whose value system will not be mocked by the foreign threat Mr. Gentleman

represents. We see the fulfillment of these threats in *The Lonely Girl* when the country mob descends on Eugene's house to stop "a nice Catholic Irish girl" from being "ruined by a dirty foreigner" (246). Though Kate prefers Mr. Gentleman's and Eugene's affections to the supposed comfort that comes from abiding by prescriptive Catholic rituals—such as Sunday Mass and confession—Kate also clearly exhibits a reluctance to show disrespect and confidently oppose the representatives of this system and the narratives they proffer. When Eugene later turns away Kate's father and the Diocesan Bishop, Kate feels miserable "for having been so cruel" to her father and instinctively asks Eugene if he will take her to Mass the next day. She notes that in the preceding five weeks she has not attended Mass despite the surveillance of the village priest who has written her three letters. Along with her nostalgia for the Irish countryside and her mother's protective sheltering of her, Kate's return to the Church and to memories of Catholic ritual and dogma dominate the *Trilogy*. While she seems an Irish heroine destined to throw off expectations, Kate routinely confirms the established power of Catholic culture in its ability to frame the Irish worldview. Imagining how Eugene will mock her belief when she meets him after Mass, Kate lays her forehead on the oak of the pew and remembers when she had once "had a crush on a nun, and decided to be a nun...and another time, for a whole week, [when she] had decided to be a saint and kept pebbles in [her] shoes as a penance" (328). After Mass, she tells Eugene she will only get married in a Catholic Church and, as she expects, receives a sarcastic quip in response. Having re-immersed herself in the aura of the Catholic community and having revisited the intensity of her childhood faith, Kate notes regarding Eugene that she can now "feel [her] attitude to him changing" (330). That Kate implicitly buys into the Irish Catholic narrative of submission to Church authority and protection of accepted family values is, O'Brien reminds us along Kate's journey, more important and more ultimately damaging than any attempted

rebellion she may also represent. The only alternative afforded her, though, is complete dependence on and revering of the foreign men who promise, half-heartedly, to care for and protect her.

In the first novel of the *Trilogy*, Kate's worshipping of Mr. Gentleman—indeed the “local people,” she says, “*christened* him Mr. Gentleman” (12 emphasis added) and she quickly labels him her “new god” (57)—reflects Irish inability for self-fulfillment and predicts the willing submission Kate enacts to marry Eugene. Though Kate claims to have “never heard” the word “traumatic,” her primary relationships in the *Trilogy* re-enact the traumatic subjugation of her people through the colonizing forces of imperial violence and, more importantly for Kate, rhetorical oppression. Eugene's references to Kate's father and to her general Irish ancestry continually instill in her a sense of inferiority and an inability to match his stature of respectability. Kate's disgust at the Irish mob's actions results largely from her sense that she will never escape this characterization of Irish ineptitude. Eugene, she knows, “would never forget what happened and,” more importantly, “some of [the mob's] conduct had rubbed off” onto Kate (302). Eugene refers to Kate's rural neighbors as “a rabblement of drunken Irish farmers” (323), reminding Kate at appropriately vulnerable moments that “it's in [her] nature to lie, like [her] lying, lackeying ancestors” (405). Eugene's insistence on the inferiority of her bloodline rather than just her own character racializes their relationship in a way that highlights O'Brien's indictment of continuing imperial rhetoric in a free Ireland. O'Brien's nod to George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*—Eugene tells Kate he will “teach her to speak properly” (282), wonders how he can ever “take [her] into society” (234) and teaches her to wear her makeup more “discreetly” (322)—suggests Eugene as a colonizing figure specifically intent on remaking Irish femininity in a mold that suits his supposedly superior taste and also makes her dependent

on his instruction. Kate's inability to control her emotions in fact invites Eugene's outrage at her failed evolution—"I don't think I can start from scratch again on a wholly simple level," he tells her. Especially, he adds, when there are "hundreds of girls, ready-made" (358).⁴⁹

Eugene, like Mr. Gentleman before him, desires Kate because of her vulnerability and, in an imperial parallel, desires to remake her only to the point of apparent respectability. Though he claims frustration with Kate's backward ways, Eugene insists that she remain inferior to him. In her pursuit of Eugene, Kate contemplates in this way the vastly divided "different worlds" from which they come: "he," she thinks, is "controlled, full of bile and intolerance, knowing everyone, knowing everything—me swayed or frightened by every wind, light-headed, *mad in one eye* (as he said), bred in (as he said again) 'Stone Age ignorance and religious *savagery*'" (345 emphasis added). Kate has just vowed to be different, to "grow up and learn to control [her] emotions" (344). We see most clearly here that Kate's view of her own character is filtered through the patronizing and insulting rhetoric of Eugene and other "continentals" like him. In this description of Kate, O'Brien encapsulates a standard imperial narrative of Irish character as cowardly, feeble, disabled, and primitive. Though it is Eugene who proffers this notion of Irishness, Kate clearly internalizes and accepts his ability to label her. He has, in fact, already "named" her "Kate," finding Caithleen "too 'Kiltartan' for his liking" (202). In the face of this characterization, Kate "pray[s] to St. Jude, patron of hopeless cases" (345), confirming her traditional dependence on Church ritual as the only acceptable method through which to seek personal empowerment. She diverges from this prescribed behavior only when she can find fulfillment instead through the acceptance of the men who judge and recreate her. When Mr. Gentleman visits Kate in Dublin, she misses Mass for the first time. Kate notes on a later Sunday as she travels to Eugene's home that she does not "feel sinful about missing Mass,

because it was early morning and [she] had washed [her] hair.” Amidst doubts about Eugene, though, she prays to her Guardian Angel for protection (215). Kate finds herself growing up and away from the Church despite a dependence on its superficial rituals—these, like her idealized remembrances of home, will offer little comfort in the face of domestic failure. Always, though, Kate returns mentally to her prescribed place in these narratives. When her marriage is ultimately failing, Kate—who initially spurned the idea of marriage and certainly feared the limitations of motherhood—desperately contemplates a “new heroic role for herself.” She will, Kate thinks, “expiate all by sinking into domesticity.” She will busy herself with mundane household tasks and “save [Eugene] the trouble of lifting up the ooze and hairs and gray slime that resulted from their daily lives” (401). That Kate even considers succumbing to this prescribed role clearly demonstrates O’Brien’s critique of imperial subjugation that repeatedly humiliates its victims, an Irish nationalism that perpetuates the disabling effects of imperial rhetoric, and an Irish familial system that allows no space for the liberation of its women.

As O’Brien’s Ireland reflects disability, stagnation, and limitation, its people cling to entrenched narratives of progress and stability that cannot satisfy them. Shortly before she has herself sterilized and begins contemplating suicide, Kate consoles Baba—pregnant from an extramarital affair—with these words: “once you have a child, it will be all right....A woman needs children. I’d have more myself” (462). Though Kate’s marriage and her attempt at motherhood have both failed, she still supports without hesitation a limiting and unrealistic view of women that suggests childrearing as their only true method of fulfillment. Like the image of Ireland O’Brien presents through Kate, the national narrative of domestic stability is shown through Kate’s experience to be an unattainable yet inescapable ideal. Kate’s nostalgia throughout the novel is indeed countered always by her more realistic acknowledgment that the

Ireland she idealizes cannot meet these expectations. Kate leaves her village for “the big city” with a sense of loss and disappointment despite its current state; the “old village...was dead and tired and old and crumbling and falling down. The shops needed paint and there seemed to be fewer geraniums in the upstairs windows than there had been when [she] was a child” (120). Kate’s nostalgia is almost always connected to her mother who, we should note, was responsible for maintaining a façade of respectability and happiness in the Brady home. Without her mother’s desire to uphold this image, Kate’s country home mirrors the deterioration and ruin she sees in the surrounding village. Later, Kate reveals with disgust that travel films about Ireland are “all lies, about dark-haired girls roaming around Connemara in red petticoats” (182). Her belief that these lies necessitate a “private” showing suggests that Kate considers herself part of a “real” Ireland that counters an ideal national image proffered to the outside world. Kate’s Ireland is instead one consistently plagued by sickness and death. Death, Kate knows, “is so important in [Ireland.] Little crosses painted white were stuck up...to mark where someone had been killed for Ireland, and not a day seemed to pass but some old person died of flu, or old age, or a stroke.” In her reverie, Kate realizes that she “only [hears] of the deaths” and only rarely hears “when a child was born” (264-5). This final comment is haunting given Kate’s later decision to have herself sterilized—the *Trilogy* clearly separates two Irelands that imperialism and nationalism have fused together. Though an ideal Ireland may be a nation worth dying for, the real nation it has become cannot sufficiently encourage and sustain the growth of new life. Even Baba, who certainly does not share Kate’s nostalgia for the country, cannot escape the fate that awaits these country girls; as they prepare to face city life, Baba and Kate agree they both look like “someone with consumption.” The reference reminds them of a poem they then recite aloud with an ironic sense of liberation and liveliness:

From a Munster Vale they brought her
From the pure and balmy air,
An Ormond Ullin's daughter
With blue eyes and golden hair.
They brought her to the city
And she faded slowly there,
For consumption has no pity
For blue eyes and golden hair. (132)

In this simple rhyme, Kate and Baba reflect an ignorance and vulnerability O'Brien's *Trilogy* consistently exploits. The connection here between nationality and physical vulnerability suggests an Irish constitution unfit for modern life and unable to protect itself from the disabling realities that exist beyond the provincialism that defines it.

Amidst an establishment narrative of national independence accompanied by domestic stability and moral exceptionalism, the *Trilogy* weaves for us a narrative of disability, disease, and impotence resulting, O'Brien suggests, from the ignorance and idealism proffered by an Irish nationalism desperate to control and homogenize the Irish community. Tellingly, when Kate and Baba, as young girls, are kicked out of their convent school for writing a dirty note about one of the nuns, they are looked at, Kate says, "as if [they] had some terrible disease" (106). O'Brien's collusion here of sexuality and disease is important considering the struggles Kate and Baba face as they move into an adulthood for which they are not prepared.⁵⁰ At 17 years old and about to have sex, Kate laughs off her landlady's concerns that she may get pregnant—"I had an idea," she tells us, "that couples had to be married for a long time before a woman got a baby" (169). This statement too is ironic when we consider that Kate and Eugene ultimately get married because Kate has gotten pregnant. Kate's naiveté is not, we find, anomalous—Baba's husband Frank does not know about women's menstruation because of his poor, bread-baking Irish mother and indoctrination from his Christian Brothers' schooling (409-10). Kate's ignorance of the body and of sexuality makes her more vulnerable, of course, to Eugene's manipulation.

Before they begin an intimate relationship, Eugene gives Kate an instructional book called *The Body and Mature Behavior*. Only Baba seems to understand the physical aspects of sex, but even she is unable to protect herself against unwanted pregnancies and unexpected disease. Though she represents a feminine worldview that insists on self-satisfaction and defeating prescribed narratives of female submission, Baba's actual fate is not much better than Kate's mother's or that of any other woman the girls have been taught to emulate. She rightly notes that in Kate's sterilization, "too much" of Kate has finally been "cut away." Kate's assertion that now she has "eliminated the risk of making the same mistake again" (508) is, I suggest, a bit more ambiguous than we may first think. That Kate and Eugene marry after she becomes pregnant is important to consider. Kate's fertility represents the possibility of childbearing, but it also suggests a multiplicity of domestic roles and characteristics Kate must then reluctantly take on. Her submission to Eugene, from the very start of their relationship, much more explicitly damages her than does her mothering of her son Cash. Amidst her final bloody remembrances of childbirth, Kate as well recalls Eugene "the guardian ghost, who shadowed her no matter what streets she crossed" (499). With Cash's conception comes Eugene's constant surveillance.

What seems to haunt Kate most—and thus, for O'Brien, what most explicitly defines the reality of mid-century Ireland—is the emotionally violent perpetuation of the standard narratives that have enslaved her. Her dream of killing Cash and her terrifying remembrances of his birth suggest not merely dissatisfaction with the role of mother but rather a desire to refuse her role in the perpetuation of this system. In Kate's memories of Cash's birth—"images of fresh-spattered blood, and forceps, and blunder" (499)—O'Brien seems to channel Samuel Beckett, her contemporary and fellow critic most obsessed with the desire to end a cycle of violence and existence that goes on without reprieve. Baba's opening line in the *Epilogue* confirms O'Brien's

and Beckett's necessary submission to this narrative—"It goes on, by Jesus, it goes on" (511). In "The Family and The Female Body in the Novels of Edna O'Brien and Julia O'Faolain," Lorna Rooks-Hughes suggests that Kate has herself sterilized in "an internalized inversion of hatred" and that Baba is in fact "redeemed as a character by her pregnancy."⁵¹ Both these assertions miss the point and rather seek to define Kate and Baba by the very narratives they seek to overthrow. Baba's daughter, we find, repeatedly rejects her, beginning with an overt rejection of Baba's attempts to breastfeed her. Baba's pregnancy establishes a sense of material well-being, but it is important to note the sense of complacency rather than satisfaction that attends it. Like Kate, who nurtures secret plans for she and Baba to "leave their husbands one day when they'd accumulated furs and diamonds," (390) Baba resents the oppressed position of women within Irish rhetoric of family values and Catholic Church mandates of feminine sexual submission. That she ends up submitting, even in part, to these limiting definitions is perhaps more tragic than Kate's anti-heroic death.

Kate does, partially at least, define her final moments and voluntarily withdraw from a system that defines her according to a value system she rejects. That her only escape is in death solidifies O'Brien's assertion that those who will not conform to the national program are allowed no development outside it. Just before Kate begins to unravel—she is taken to a psychiatric ward after a public display of hysterics and obscenities—she writes Eugene a groveling letter in which she vows future submission and blames her wrongdoing on burgeoning mental illness. "I have a screw loose," she tells him, insisting she is not "on solid ground." Kate signs the letter "Little Kate" as a "harking back to the early days" without regard to the "emotional pummeling" she has admittedly received from him over the years (447). Eugene's reply, that "little Kate" is "a misnomer" (447) ultimately highlights the failure of Eugene's

colonizing project and, importantly, Kate's inability to actually succeed despite the ability to redefine herself. Though, in the end, Kate is not the submissive and easily controlled "colleen" Eugene expects, she remains indebted to Eugene's affection and cannot establish a life for herself beyond the boundaries expected to define her. At the prospect of a sudden crash in the Underground—shortly before her sterilization—Kate considers three things she would perhaps cry out: the reality of sexual dissatisfaction, Cash's name, or an Act of Perfect Contrition (500). For Kate, these three last images of life's significance represent the narratives that have so long defined her. Her ultimate dissatisfaction in sexual affairs exposes finally for Kate the power of romantic illusions and suggests the impossibility of ever satisfying her own desires. In thinking of her son Cash, Kate in effect defies the notion that it is motherhood that terrifies and paralyzes her. She believes in nurturing Cash and does so, we could argue, by allowing him in the end not to witness her emotional undoing. Her battle against motherhood is waged rather within the socially and politically inflected institution of de Valera's national program. Perhaps most telling, though, is Kate's instinctual desire to assuage some assumed sense of guilt and submit to the established comforts of Catholic ritual. In referencing the Act of Contrition, Kate reminds us that despite her desire to resist such classifications, she too cannot imagine a life beyond their bounds. This condition, O'Brien suggests, is exemplified in the Irish subject. Baba, the *Trilogy's* voice of reason against Kate's persistent idealism, speaks O'Brien's critique in her description of the "old sod" that is their national land—Baba intends to scatter Kate's ashes "between the bogs and the bog lakes and the murmuring waters and every other fucking bit of depressingness that oozes from every hectometer and every furlong of the place." Baba's hope that Kate will arise nightly "like the banshee and [do] battle with her progenitors" (523) confirms that to blame for Kate's misery are generations of Irishmen (and women) willingly engendering

and perpetuating an atmosphere of stagnation and impoverishment. Most importantly, though, for an analysis of Irish development and national definition, Kate's stunted development exists always in tension with a desire to fulfill the very archetypes of success she has seen disable her own potential.

Chapter 3

McCabe/Beckett: Confining Republican Fantasies, Confined Irish Narrators

“Ireland,” James Joyce famously wrote, “is the old sow that eats her farrow.”⁵² Twenty-one years later, Samuel Beckett as scathingly asserted in “Censorship in the Saorstát” that while “France may commit race suicide, Erin will never. And should she be found at any time deficient in Cuchulains, at least it shall never be said that they were contraceived.”⁵³ These two seemingly disparate maxims—each reflecting Ireland’s history of prolific physical procreation despite cultural self-effacement and metaphorically mutilating standards of cultural reproduction—both prefigure *Malone Dies*’ horrifying struggle, the incessant desire to create anew from a source disabled, confined, and complacent. “I shall try and make a little creature,” Malone says, “to hold in my arms... And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it.” Despite his best attempts and many self-delusions, Malone cannot help but create “in [his] image,” engendering then for escapist pleasure exactly the narratives of banality, sterility, and confinement that define his current state.⁵⁴

This dialectic of invention and destruction sustains Malone as he simultaneously accepts its futility and wishes for an end to the humorous tedium it brings. His inability to escape the very normative narratives that disgust and entrap him reflects Beckett’s ultimate critique of a mid-century Irish nationalism whose rhetoric outcasts yet contains the improperly domesticated and physically crippled Malone as it makes sterile the Irish cultural imagination. Like Malone, Patrick McCabe’s Francie Brady of *The Butcher Boy* is a product of this materially-obsessed and forward-looking Irish nationalism that effectively refuses the conception of progress it seeks to imitate.⁵⁵ Francie, again like Malone, represents that which acceptable republican nationalism

cannot contain, a physical repository of historical trauma that, like Walter Benjamin's crystallized monad, threatens to "blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history."⁵⁶ As deviant threats to the established order, McCabe's and Beckett's characters are thus contained by the controlling forces that proffer and maintain this national image as a counter-narrative to imperial history. Ironically, then, the Irish Republic itself becomes the disabling and oppressive rhetorical authority revolutionary nationalism allegedly cast off.

Written across five decades and spanning three major historical periods in Irish national development—the Act of Union, the Irish Free State, and the Irish Republic—Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth*, Beckett's *Malone Dies*, and McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* each presents a tale of mental and physical regression, disintegration, and destruction.⁵⁷ That each narrator speaks from a place of presumably state-sponsored confinement reinforces their desperate need to relate personal histories that, like Ireland's own history of containment, are threatened by a more wholesome and holistic master narrative. Long before Beckett pens Malone's famous opening line—"I shall soon be quite dead at last" (179)—O'Brien's Bonaparte O'Coonassa taunts us with a tale he most certainly must write as "the next life is approaching [him] swiftly" (11). Like Malone, Bonaparte is imprisoned and looked after; he controls only the narrative of his own regression to this final state of dismay brought about, he insists, through the "Gaelic hardship" of "distress, need, ill-treatment, adversity, calamity, foul play, misery, famine, and ill-luck" (125). Francie narrates the tale of his own devolution from the safe confines of a prison mental ward. The guard's suggestion that soon Francie's solitary will finish and he will be moved with the general prison population gets a laugh from the troubled boy—"How," he wonders (in a perfectly Beckettian tone), "can your solitary finish?" (230).

That each crippled narrator seemingly replaces one who came before—Bonaparte crosses paths with his father who leaves the prison as Bonaparte enters; Malone, like Molly, suspects he may be in his mother's room; Francie's mother has previously occupied the mental institution before committing suicide—suggests also a pattern of disability and sterility passed down from one Irish generation to the next during a period of intended germination and growth. Together, the mingled voices of these narrators—each physically or mentally disabled, each spatially confined, each menacingly supervised, and each clinging only to the prospect of spinning the narrative of his own unraveling—unflinchingly display a triangulation of violence, disability, and containment that looks back to the crippling rule of British imperialism and the founding of an Irish Republic desperate to contain those unable to suffer its monolithic brand of supposedly liberating nationalism.

**Pigs, Priests, and Psychoses, or
The Adolescent Immolation of McCabe's *Butcher Boy***

In anti-*bildungsroman* fashion,⁵⁸ Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* charts the horrific regression and self-destruction of Francie Brady, a young Irish boy whose coming-of-age story is one of frustration, disappointment, and disillusion. Rather than culminating in personal enlightenment and social reconciliation to a shared communal identity, Francie's journey ends in isolation and attempted self-immolation. He is one of many Irish anti-heroes who narrates the tale of his own destruction from a place of imprisonment and punishment. After terrorizing and violently murdering Mrs. Nugent, a townswoman who demeans the Brady family and maintains an air of superiority over them, Francie is confined to an institution, likely for the criminally insane. This final imprisonment is Francie's third of the novel—he has previously been sent

away first for breaking into the Nugents' house and defecating on their carpet, and then for his apparent insanity in living for weeks with the decomposing body of his dead father. Likewise, he is the third of his three-person family to be removed from society to a public institution. His father's alcoholism and low level of achievement seem apparently connected to his youth in an orphanage; Francie's mother is sent to an insane asylum early in the novel from which she is eventually released only to commit suicide shortly after. Francie's eventual confinement—for very real crimes and very real mental illness—thus presents the only feasible ending for Francie whose fate is largely written by the oppressed, depressed, and unstable parents whose self-destructions precede his own. The Brady family thus exemplifies a pattern of instability, oppression, and regression that, I would argue, is characteristic of the Irish postcolonial condition.

Francie's story, the condition of his family, and the lives of his neighbors suggest that the stain of imperial discourse and foreign occupation reach well into the postcolonial era to constrain and inhibit the growth of the Irish nation. Even more importantly, the ridicule and abuse Francie endures at the hands of his own community remind us of the equally deadening role of extreme Irish nationalism in the oppression of the individual. In *The Butcher Boy*, we thus see the ultimate indictment of imperial ideologies of Irish disability and Free State fantasies of familial strength and self-sufficiency. Francie's schizophrenic experience of the world testifies to an Ireland overwhelmed by historically violent ideologies culturally enforced by the British Empire and Irish Free State as well as republican nationalism. The very real violence perpetrated in *The Butcher Boy* results, I suggest, from the internalization of the master-slave narrative which underlies all colonial and postcolonial fictions.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha asserts that “the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other.”⁵⁹ Similarly colluding the private and the public, Eamon de Valera, in his 1946 speech celebrating the centenary of Parnell’s birth, proclaimed that “it is on the character of the individual citizen that the character and the future of the nation must ultimately depend” (493). These declarations support a view of the individual as inextricably linked to the development and perception of the modern nation. As such, *The Butcher Boy*, like many colonial and postcolonial Irish novels, presents in Francie Brady the privatization of the national struggle for dignity, stability, and fulfillment. That struggle, the novel exposes, is a failed one. As de Valera’s Ireland is characterized by a people who cultivate “the things of the mind and spirit” and are thus “able to have the happiness of a full life” (606), Francie’s Ireland is consumed by deprivation and depression. Francie’s ongoing obsession with Mrs. Nugent and her ridiculing of the Brady family—both of which form the novel’s central tension—revolve essentially around the issue of Irish “national character,” that set of ideal standards Seamus Deane calls “perhaps the most enduring and insubstantial creation of all nationalist mythologies.”⁶⁰ Francie is labeled “unfit” and removed from the community because he does not reflect “true Irishness” as it is ideally envisioned by the new Irish Republic.

Of central importance to any examination of postcolonial Irish literature, and more so that of the postcolonial Irish citizen, is the remarkable similarity between the rhetoric of Irish nationalism and that of British imperialism. In her Abbey-promoting letter “Our Irish Theatre,” Lady Augusta Gregory promises to show “that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism” (378). “The Irish

people,” she adds, “are weary of misrepresentation” (379). The Irish nation emerges out of a centuries-long occupation not only of Irish land but indeed of the very notion of Irishness. In justifying its metaphorical superiority and actual domination, the British Empire thus created an Ireland wholly “other” than itself, that which is primitive, unskilled, and unfit for self-government. Ironically, though, the Irish nation can thus only claim its own validity on the terms its imperial masters designed. As Deane suggests, “in the attempted discovery of its ‘true’ identity, a community often begins with the demolition of the false stereotypes within which it has been entrapped” (12). What remains, of course, is the emulation of the imperial masters at the expense of those who do not fit the new mold of progressive modernization and upward social mobility. As Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland*, describes the new Free State regime, “war and civil war appeared to have drained all energy and imagination away: there was precious little left with which to reimagine the national condition.” Rather, “the newly-liberated people would be employing the unmodified devices of the old regime upon themselves.”⁶¹

The Butcher Boy, like many Irish novels, exhibits an Irish community’s ongoing struggle to define its own “Irishness” against an “otherness” so long identified by imperial rhetoric with Irish incompetence and disability. This attempt, like the Free State’s initial flexing of power, leads to the oppression and “othering” of supposedly “unfit” Irish like the Brady family. As Tim Gauthier notes in his article “Identity, Self Loathing, and the Neocolonial Condition in Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy*,” members of the new Irish community, particularly Mrs. Nugent, “cannot help the Bradys too much, for to do so would eliminate the Other by which she defines herself, a self dependent on an established, and dubious, superiority.”⁶² Mrs. Nugent’s rhetorical attack on the Brady family serves, Gauthier suggests, “to accentuate the distance between her family and theirs and to denote the all-important difference that distinguishes them.” Without

this constant differentiation, the alcoholism, underachievement, poverty and mental illness associated with the Brady family become markers for the entire community. By calling the Bradys “Pigs,” Mrs. Nugent not only humiliates them, she effectively defines them and “others” them á la the colonizers who came before her.

Mrs. Nugent’s emphasis on the animality and pigishness of her alleged inferiors parallels a common Irish stereotype. Donna Potts writes in “From Tír na nÓg to Tír na Muck” that “McCabe’s evocation of stereotypical Irishness is nowhere more evident than in his extensive reference to pigs, which have long been associated with Ireland. In fact,” she notes, “one of the oldest epithets for Ireland is *Muck Inis*, or ‘Pig Island.’”⁶³ Kiberd notes as well that “for more than two hundred years, the stage Irishman had been associated in the English folk mind with animals, especially with pigs” (504). “Such visual metaphors,” Kiberd adds, “persisted into the [twentieth] century” as the British magazine *Punch* “used the pig to denote the Irish people throughout the war of independence” (505). McCabe’s identification of the Brady family and pigs recalls a history of Irish defamation satirized at length in Flann O’Brien’s *The Poor Mouth*, a novel that, not unlike McCabe’s, takes its readers back in time to undermine and re-evaluate the rhetoric not only of British Imperialism but of Irish nationalism. *The Poor Mouth*, subtitled *A Bad Story About the Hard Life*, is, like *The Butcher Boy*, a coming-of-age tale narrated by the main character from a state of confinement. Like Francie Brady, *The Poor Mouth*’s Bonaparte O’Coonassa never really matures. That is, he is unable to progress beyond the static failure we witness from the novel’s opening scenes. We are notified at the novel’s start that Bonaparte is “safe in jail and free from the miseries of life” (7). That Bonaparte finally meets his father at the novel’s end when they pass each other in jail—his father is being released after 29 years just as

Bonaparte has been sentenced to the same—suggests an ongoing pattern of Irish failure and lack of successful progression.

As the novel details the miseries of peasant life and describes Bonaparte's family lodgings—"Yonder a bed with pigs upon it; here a bed with people"—we see a portrait of the rural Irishman in line with British imperial rhetoric and in direct contrast with the Irish Revival's romanticization of Irish simplicity, nobility, and spirit (18). O'Brien's 1941 novel intensely satirizes the ideals of the Irish Revival and the brand of nationalism it spawned. De Valera, Easter Rising participant in 1916 and *Taoiseach* of the Irish Republic by the time of *The Poor Mouth's* publication, continued the standard narrative—popularized in turn by the Young Irelanders, the Gaelic League, and W.B. Yeats's literary revival—that elevated true Irishness by an appeal to the spiritually pure and superior essence of the Irish peasantry. As Gearóid Ó Crualaoich notes, de Valera often "restated his conviction that there lay in the heart of every Irishman a native, undying desire to see his country not only politically free but truly Irish as well."⁶⁴ Referencing de Valera's oft-cited 1943 St. Patrick's Day address, Ó Crualaoich links the de Valerian picture of true Irishness to a vision of "cosy homesteads, joyous fields...and fireside forums for the wisdom of serene old age" (47). This idealization of rural Irish living—complete with "joyous fields and villages"—suggests a level of material comfort that is essential to progressive Irish nationalism of the 1940s. It recalls also, though, a more simple time and an image of Irish comfort that depends on spiritual rather than material comfort. Ó Crualaoich rightfully links the "characteristically nineteenth-century strand of de Valera's social thinking" to an idealization that "tends to lift 'the peasant' and traditional society in general out of history, regarding both as changeless...as far less 'tainted' by industrialism...than has actually been the case" (50-1). This artificial elevation also, we should add, portrays the peasant as unaffected by

the realities of rural life—miserable living conditions, abject poverty, and, of course, the plight of foreign domination of land and resources. Amidst de Valera’s continued, though modernized, call for Irish spiritual purity and domestic tranquility, *The Poor Mouth* presents the ideal Irish peasant, the presumed aristocrat in disguise, as spiritually ignorant and ignoble. Realistically, his concerns are explicitly bodily and material.⁶⁵ Life, as Bonaparte says, is “in one way or another...passing us by and we [are] suffering misery, sometimes having a potato and at other times having nothing in our mouths but sweet words of Gaelic” (99).

Bonaparte and his family are literally living like pigs, a charge metaphorically leveled at the Bradys who as well present a pattern of continual failure to meet the idealized standards set by a new wave of Irish patriotism. O’Brien’s satire goes even deeper in identifying the rural Irish with the animals that daily surround them. Bonaparte recounts a circumstance in which a “gentleman...[goes] astray in the bog-mist” and arrives at “the mouth of the glen.” In amazement at the “shameful” and “improper” mixed lodging of the O’Coonassas and their “brute beasts,” the gentleman suggests the building of a hut aside the house (20). Comically, the O’Coonassa family takes the advice quite readily but uses the leaky hut for their own lodging, leaving the pigs in the proper house—the Irish and their pigs have thus switched places and become embodiments of each other. That the lost gentleman’s advice is improperly heeded portrays the O’Coonassa family and their rural Irish neighbors as beyond any rational civilizing impulse. This irredeemable brutishness can be attributed, Bonaparte often tells us, to the fate of the Gael—“no one has any respect for him because he’s Gaelic to the marrow” (34). O’Brien’s particular choice of term—“Gaelic to the marrow”—suggests a most direct identification of racial “Irishness” with animality, poverty, and ignorance. In his frequent references to the Gaelic language—famously revived and revered by Douglas Hyde and other Gaelic League

Revivalists—Bonaparte tells us that one’s “accuracy of Gaelic (as well as holiness of spirit) grew in proportion to one’s lack of worldly goods” (49). Like the Irish Revivalists and their nationalist successors, O’Brien sets the supposed virtue of spiritual holiness against the possession of wealth and security. He does so, of course, with tragicomic results. The virtues touted by Irish nationalism do not seem quite so valuable amidst the real physical misery Bonaparte and his family must constantly endure.

Like the idealization of peasant life, the “language question” is itself questioned in O’Brien’s novel. Presented by the Gaelic League as the cornerstone of true Irishness and traditional culture, the Gaelic language is identified in *The Poor Mouth* with the epitome of ignorance, poverty, and, most importantly, the inability to progress beyond one’s current state. Those who speak the best Gaelic are, it seems, destined to remain the poorest of the poor. Their perfection of Gaelic culture is an end in itself that far from guarantees self-sufficiency or even the basic ability to survive. In maintaining the importance of the “language question” to the peasants and the visitors who come to examine them, O’Brien critiques the very debate surrounding cultural nationalism as yet another empty technique for the improvement of Irish life. To the peasants themselves, Gaelic is a point of pride when there is no other comfort to cling to. To the Dublin gentleman and the English inspector, Gaelic is a point of intrigue that reveals the true Irishness of the ignorant. O’Brien’s most scathing mockery of Gaelic comes in the description of the O’Coonassa family pig that unwittingly fools “a gentleman from Dublin” who is “extremely interested in Gaelic” and has come to collect folklore from the peasants:

The gentleman was becoming a little disheartened. He had not collected one of the gems of our ancients that night. . . . Suddenly he noticed a commotion at the doorway. Then, by the weak light of the fire, he saw the door being pushed in (it was never equipped with a bolt) and in came a poor old man, drenched and wet, drunk to the full of his skin and creeping instead of walking upright because of the drunkenness. . . .the gentleman’s heart leaped when he heard a great flow of talk issuing from that place. It really was

rapid, complicated, stern speech...but the gentleman did not tarry to understand it. ...he understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible. (44)

The visiting gentleman who collects the speech of the “rambling pig” is, in fact, a scholar who then takes his recorded findings to the “learned ones of the Continent” (44). Thus, in an international indictment of Irish civilization, the Gaelic-speaking peasants are determined indistinguishable from the pigs with which they live.

O’Brien’s comic use of the Irishman as pig and his recycling of imperial rhetoric effectively weaken the intended British insult as they simultaneously mock the Irish denial of hard times in rural modern Ireland. In one of *The Poor Mouth*’s most comical and most poignant scenes, the O’Coonassa family successfully hoodwinks an English inspector who, by order of the English government, is paying two pounds “for every child...that speaks English instead of this thieving Gaelic” (35). Noting that “youngsters and piglets have the same habits” and “a close likeness between their skins,” the O’Coonassa family proceeds to fashion suits for their sow’s newly arrived brood and to pass the pigs off as human children (36). Most importantly, they are successful in their duplicity simply because the inspector expects no less from these inhabitants than the foul stench which keeps him from actually entering the house and properly examining the pigs. In taking on exactly the characteristics they are believed to exhibit, the Irish peasants win a small victory over their masters in O’Brien’s story. Not so with Francie Brady, whose growing internalization of Mrs. Nugent’s slurs on his family spawns a much more horrific and violent self-destruction. Francie’s violent outburst is all the more shocking because of the façade of respectability the Ireland of his time is trying so desperately to maintain.

Though Francie at times internalizes and then reproduces the rhetoric of underachievement and disability Mrs. Nugent first articulates, he maintains until almost the

novel's end a perhaps equally delusional belief that he can evade her characterization and return to better times. Though certainly, as Gauthier suggests, Francie "achieves some form of stability when Mrs. Nugent foists an identity on him," it is perhaps a bit premature to suggest that Francie "comes to accept and adopt his alternate identity," at least, that is, without some reservation (2). Francie's continual adoption of other alternate identities, "on his travels" to Dublin and even through town, itself presents Francie's desire to forge an identity that at least supercedes the narrow confines of Mrs. Nugent's label. The slippage between these identities and Francie's inability, even to the novel's end, to fully renounce his Mrs. Nugent-imposed identity attests to the power this particular label carries. After he has murdered Mrs. Nugent, Francie still feels her accusations. His misreading of the newspaper—"Francis Brady is a pig," rather than "Francis Brady is a pig butcher in a local abattoir"—confirms that Mrs. Nugent's power over Francie extends beyond her death (228). And yet, the novel ends with Francie recreating his favorite childhood remembrance of his friendship with Joe Purcell. With "tears streaming down [his] face," Francie returns to his natural state of delusion and innocence. Like his mother before him, he asserts, even from the mental institution, that "nobody's letting [him] down again" (231). This delusional optimism reflects perhaps another of the most severe consequences of the abuse Francie and his family suffer—he is victim always of what Martin McLoone calls a "fatal misrecognition."⁶⁶ That is, Francie is unable to accurately assess his own circumstance, and he clings always to an ideal image that will ease his suffering. In doing so, Francie illustrates, with less success, precisely the kind of necessarily idealistic self-identification his community and the nation advocate.

In calling for a national Irish character of the spirit beyond material concerns, de Valera and his contemporaries echoed the very ideals of the Irish Revival championed fifty years earlier

at the Easter Rising. This fantasy of a spiritual Irish nation of high moral values and superior character not fit for captivity and oppression sets the scene for an Irish nation on the rise just as, according to Tom Herron, it “ruthlessly concealed such problems as mental illness, alcoholism, misogyny, domestic violence and child abuse.”⁶⁷ It is these social embarrassments that define the Brady family and classify *The Butcher Boy* as a veritable exposé of disability and indifference in the Irish Republic. While most critics reference Francie’s descent into delusion and the metaphorical “madness” that ensues, few consider at length the presence of mental illness in *The Butcher Boy* as itself reflecting postcolonial Ireland’s impaired ability to achieve the stability and independence it so desires. Herron does assert that for McCabe, “it is madness which is the inevitable consequence of the clash of two systems,” a new modern Ireland and the traditional structures that underlay Irish cultural identity (169). Herron’s emphasis, though, on the traditional-modern shift in Irish culture disregards a legacy of pathological and metaphorical madness that prefigures Francie’s historical moment.⁶⁸ Mrs. Nugent’s purposeful labeling/renaming of the Bradys and McCabe’s intentional use of characteristically imperial rhetoric suggest that the conflict of power and image in *The Butcher Boy* recalls a larger history of subjugation and dispossession. Herron is quite right, however, to read the community’s fear of regression and “contamination” as indicative of a modern nation’s identity crisis. Perhaps, then, contemporary novels like *The Butcher Boy* suggest that the residue of historical violence is one of lasting impairment beyond the quick fix of a national program that must logically rely on presenting a strong national citizenry.

In *Bending Over Backwards*, Lennard Davis asserts that “what is universal in life... is the experience of the limitations of the body.”⁶⁹ In this postmodern era of what Davis calls “dismodernism,” “impairment,” he says, “is the rule, and normalcy is the fantasy” (31). Davis

suggests that the “fantasy of culture, democracy, and capitalism”—a list to which we may, I think, add nationalism—“is the perfection of the body and its activities” (32). Likewise, the perfection of mental health ensures the type of ideal citizen—profound of thought, feeling, and spirit—that de Valera envisions for modern Ireland. But, as Davis’s contention suggests, postcolonial Irish literature, replete with mentally and physically disabled characters, displays a very real and very common state of fragmentation and instability. As J.J. Lee writes in *Ireland 1912-1985 Politics and Society*, well into and beyond the Free State era, Ireland “continued to be characterized by a high incidence of mental disease, by hideous family living conditions in its urban slums, and by a demoralized casual working class, urban as well as rural.”⁷⁰ Through Francie’s schizophrenic outbursts and his social apathy, McCabe explicitly links Irish “impairment” and mental disease to the mock-imperial gaze of Mrs. Nugent and the desire for domestic tranquility championed by his supposedly stable community. While McLoone is partially correct in his belief that Francie’s psychosis results from the combination of “narrow Catholic society...a culture riven by poverty...[and] modernization’s excesses, personified in Mrs. Nugent’s pretentio[ns],” he neglects Ma Brady’s insanity as another obvious ingredient to Francie’s mental illness. Though Francie’s mother commits suicide quite early on in the novel, the sadness she exhibits and her attempts to stave off the enveloping madness drive Francie’s own struggle with mental health. We learn through Francie’s father—“he said she was mad like all the Magees”—that Francie is born into a pattern of inescapable mental illness (6). After she comes back from the “madhouse” but before she commits suicide, we find Francie’s mother repeating variations on the phrase “them days are over that’s all in the past” (20). When a fight erupts during Uncle Alo’s visit, Francie notes that his mother is trying to “hold...in” an outburst because she is “afraid” of going back to the institution (35). Francie’s realization toward the

novel's end that he is "getting as bad as ma" suggests both an awareness of his own impairment and a tragic inability to escape the consequences (197). He repeats an obsessive refrain throughout the novel—"soon it would be all back the way it used to be" (115). Like his mother, Francie is always trying to put his delusions and his outbursts behind him. But try as they may, Francie and his mother cannot conceal the instability the community and in fact the Irish nation so readily deny.

Toward the novel's beginning Francie asserts, "it was all going well until the telly went. Phut! ...I fiddled with it but all I got was a blizzard of snow...I was just sitting there the next thing—out like a light" (10). Francie's extensive description of the television's "breakdown," a word he avoids using in relation to his mother's (and his own) mental episodes, reflects some of the novel's important truths about ill-treated mental illness. Francie and his father both "fiddle" with the television in an attempt to fix it; his father's methods are particularly violent—"He smacked it with his hand...drew out and out his boot through it, the glass went everywhere" (11). After exerting this wasted energy, Francie's father "[falls] asleep on the sofa with one shoe hanging off" and disregards the television. Francie knows, despite his father's initial, feeble attempt, that "it'd lie there glass and all and nobody would ever bother coming to fix it" (11). Despite his seemingly firm resignation, Francie asks Mickey Traynor, the television man, about the broken television months later in a direct refusal to accept that it, like his family, cannot be fixed. Echoing this sentiment of perpetual failure and disability, the sergeant who arrests Francie at the Nugent house suggests that he is victim to some sort of innate piggishness—"Not that you could be any different" (69). This belief works, of course, in concert with the community's plan to lock Francie away rather than effectively treat him. After Francie is found living with his father's corpse, Francie is given shock therapy. The doctors take him "off to other garages and

reminds us of the Church's role in controlling those who fall outside established standards of propriety and respectability (88).

This sense of control over national image and ability is countered, of course, by the "madness" Francie witnesses within the institution. There he is surrounded by mental illness masquerading, ironically, as patriotism and religious fervor, the core principles of Irish nationalism. In the institution he is sexually abused by an obviously delusional priest he dubs "Father Tiddly" and befriends a low-level institution lackey who claims to have participated in the Easter Rising and is clearly unaware of his current reality. Francie divides his time "between being Tiddly's wife and keeping an eye out for the Black and Tans for the gardener" (95). Through Francie's experience in the institution, McCabe thus effectively mocks and exposes the "insanity" of the very ideals upon which the nation has been founded. That Francie later sees Father Tiddly being taken "away off to the garage to rub some bogman with his mickey" confirms the continued cycle of untreated mental illness (100). Father Tiddly's insanity saves Francie from further punishment and in effect releases him back into society without treatment. The priest himself is taken away where his actions can be further concealed—Bubble, the head priest, is "afraid...that everybody would hear" (101) and that the Church's ideals of morality and propriety will be exposed as false. The image of the nation depends, of course, on the maintenance of these ideals, and thus Francie is given the reward of freedom and the chance, as he sees it, to finally make things right again. When Joe reacts badly to Francie's revelation about the abuse—"I was in a cold sweat because of the way Joe was looking at me" (104)—Francie retracts his accusation. "I fairly fooled you," he says. "Imagine someone doing the like of that!" (104). To preserve his friendship with Joe, linked throughout the novel to Francie's level of stability, Francie too must participate in the charade of truly noble Irishness.

Francie's actions in fact demonstrate an understanding, despite his delusions, of the "national character" the community is trying desperately to display. McCabe's first person narration of Francie's thoughts effectively exposes the contradictions and struggles we imagine are inherent in the larger community beyond the Brady family. Though the Bradys are unable to reach an acceptable "standard" of success and ability, Francie clearly knows what the community expects and conforms whenever possible to an image that will spare him punishment and help him blend in. Francie realizes at the institution that he has, in a sense, "gone too far" by breaking into the Nugents' house. Francie's pledge to receive the "Francie Brady Not a Bad Bastard Any More Diploma" essentially displays his recognition of his own "difference" and his ability to work the system intended to root out such deviation. Distressed at being looked at as an orphan, Francie remembers his plan and gives a woman "a sad, ashamed look instead" to gain sympathy for his plight and fit in with the other boys. The hope, of course, is that he will be able, eventually, to go back home and "start from the beginning again" his friendship with Joe Purcell and the maintenance of his family's reputation (79). The emphasis, especially during Francie's institutionalization, on the outward appearance of propriety, sanity, and holiness suggests—as does his mother's quick release from the mental institution—a national program well-versed in the image of ability but always only barely concealing a "breakdown."

Francie's decision to manipulate the system of religious belief and apparent holiness is particularly important; through Francie's experience of the Church McCabe continues his critique of a narrow, image-based Irish nationalism. As the boys work in the fields, Fr. Bubble proselytizes on nationhood and the building of Irish character through imperial oppression, talking about "the old days when he was young and the English were killing everybody...and you were lucky if you got one slice of soda bread to feed the whole family" (80). Bubble's belief

that abject living conditions, violence, and poverty ennobled the Irish spirit supports an Irish nationalism progressive in its desire for cosmopolitan acceptance and material success but defined more narrowly through a national character that highlights spirituality and temperance.

The priests' attitude toward Francie and more generally toward the rehabilitation of the boys in their care presents clearly the hypocrisy and ignorance that underlay the concept of a distinctively Catholic Irish national character. As we have seen already, Fr. Tiddly epitomizes the dangers of a controlling and itself unraveling Catholic Church. Like the shock therapy Francie receives in his second institutional stay, the sexual abuse at the hands of Fr. Tiddly is an added impediment to Francie's stability despite the priest's supposed role of caregiver and healer. Not long after he arrives at the institution, Francie finds a way out through the imitation and appearance of holiness. Francie attracts Bubble's and Tiddly's attention by fabricating stories of saintly visions.⁷¹ The scheme comes, Francie tells us, from a book he read "about this holy Italian boy." Once his initial imitation gains him a higher status—"Father...[says he] had unlocked something very precious"—Francie "finds dozens of the fuckers" to talk to (83). With each vision, Francie's inadequacies and inabilities are forgotten. He becomes an altar boy and finds himself well on the way to release. The ease with which he manipulates the system betrays the inadequacy of national narratives to fully define the people they represent. Nationalism's dialectical response to a history of imperialism gets subsumed eventually, McCabe suggests, by an inflexible national definition upheld in appearance but not in practice. Francie's role as altar boy confirms this disconnect—"I was supposed to say *Et clamor meus ad te veniat*. *Et fucky wucky ticky tocky* that was what I said instead. But it didn't matter as long as you muttered something" (82).

As Francie's institutional experience exposes the falsity and emptiness of Church rhetoric, his almost fatal optimism and nostalgia further critique the utility of ideal nationalism despite its intense appeal. Francie's longing for a time "in the beginning" when his family was stable betrays his desire for the type of tranquility we never witness in the novel. That Francie doesn't narrate any specific memories suggests that his is an empty nostalgia, itself an illusion of better times that never existed. His nostalgia reminds us of Bonaparte O'Coonassa's constant refrain—"our likes will never be there again" (11). Ironically, in Bonaparte's tale the "likes" of the Gaels leave nothing to be mourned. The same is true of the Brady family, and yet Francie insists on mourning a lost past we never quite see. In discussing Francie's backward-looking fantasy, Gauthier notes that Francie's "nostalgia for a past before everything went wrong correlates with Ireland's striving to recover a precolonial identity" (10). That "the novel contains little history, indigenous or colonial," Gauthier adds, contributes to McCabe's message that "searching for a past has no point because it has already been constructed by the colonizer and thus has no real bearing on the formulation of one's (national) identity" (7-8). Regarding history and nostalgia, Herron reads in McCabe a horrifying belief that "the past, especially the nation's official past, is prone to revision and contamination...by a regime in which heroic figures and events are seen as absurd irrelevancies" (169). From differing perspectives on revisionist Irish history, both critics acknowledge the unexamined narrative of the Brady's past as providing an insufficient foundation on which to build a stable present and future. The evidentiary lack regarding Brady family happiness also correlates, I would argue, with the empty ideals put forth by Irish revivalism and continued by the nationalism of the Irish Republic. The call to a precolonial identity necessarily demands, as Deane says, "readings of the past that are as monolithic as that which they are trying to supplant."⁷² We can apply this description quite aptly to the overly

romantic and sentimental story of Francie's parents' honeymoon, a narrative intended, of course, to unilaterally denounce their present state of drunken and disabled ineptitude. In denying its colonial history, the nationalism of the Irish Republic similarly demands conformity to ideals that reflect the nation's nobility, purity, and temperance—ideals the Brady family certainly does not live up to.

The breakdown of nostalgia is signaled early on by both Francie's inability to gauge the reality of his own circumstance and Francie's eagerness to weave a tale incompatible with that reality. In constructing his family narrative, Francie thus mimics the nation's promulgation of Irish ideals and a mythical Irish past that extends beyond troubled times into an Edenic state of purity and bliss. The Brady's Christmas party, the one time in the novel when Uncle Alo returns somewhat victoriously from England, represents in Francie's mind a time of domestic stability and happiness. In real time, amidst the party itself, Francie experiences the reality but constructs a more appealing narrative—when things go awry, Francie “wants to say to [his father] stop it, quit doing that.” He says, instead, “that was the best night ever” (33). Similarly, when he is released by the priests back into a town that despises and degrades him, Francie says to himself that “just being here is so good I could stand here for ever” (107). This attachment to the town rests largely, of course, on his and Joe's friendship which has already, via Joe's correspondence, been called into question. Like his father, Francie copes with his present trauma only through clinging to an idealized past. The novel's periodic return to his father's idealized memory of the Bundoran honeymoon suggests yet again that Francie's coping mechanism is a learned behavior and that sustaining images of the past are often perverted to serve the present. The first complete telling of the honeymoon narrative, beyond the fragments revealed at the Christmas party, comes

when Francie's father visits him at the "school for bad boys." This "house of a hundred windows" reminds Francie's father of the Belfast orphanage where he spent his youth.

As this parallel image reinforces the Brady family history of instability and degeneration, it also triggers in Francie's father the need to escape into a nostalgic reverie that will soothe the current pain. Significantly, the story of the Brady Bundoran trip includes Francie's father's memory of reading a biography of Michael Collins, "revolutionary hero" (90). McCabe invokes Collins—a leading figure in Free State politics and, like de Valera, a survivor of the Easter Rising—three times in the novel. Francie has obviously heard this story before, as he later remarks that "all [he] cared about in the GPO was Michael Collins and that was only because da was reading a book about him when they were in Bundoran" (94). Recalling Gauthier's observation of *The Butcher Boy's* scant historical references, we should note here Francie's conflation of personal and national history. His use, like the nation's, for such historical figures depends on their ability to construct a proper narrative for the present. Like Francie's father, the gardener at the institution reveres Collins as a hero. Later—significantly in Bundoran where his nostalgic ideal is destroyed—Francie meets an "old lad" who speaks of Collins "except that he said he was the worst bastard ever was put on this earth because he sold out the country" (189). McCabe's use of these two men and Francie's acknowledgment of their opposing views enhances the novel's critique of a national narrative built admittedly on intra-national conflict regarding the definition of an Irish nation. In questioning the old lad who is anti-Collins, Francie acknowledges a split in feeling regarding two famous national leaders—that Collins was sent to London by de Valera "against his better judgment...to negotiate the Treaty" and "compromise the Republic" accounts for Collins's ambivalent historical reception.⁷³ The old lad's final thought that he'd give both Collins and de Valera "two in the head apiece" effectively refutes the

idealized mythology surrounding the key moments and transformative figures of Irish independence. It is appropriate then that the myth of the Brady honeymoon is dispelled shortly after by an innkeeper who remembers the Bradys by their drunken pigishness. To this point, McCabe uses the Bundoran narrative to epitomize a lost “Brady” wholeness comparable to a lost Irishness inscrutable during centuries of colonial oppression but reclaimed through Irish rebellion, revival, and nationalism. The mockery of Collins’s and de Valera’s contributions to current Irish nationalism cements McCabe’s critique of any idealized past.⁷⁴

In Francie’s community, Mrs. Nugent stands in for the colonial power against whose rhetoric this idealized national past was constructed. Francie’s nightmare begins, in his mind, because the Nugent family has recently returned from England to cast their judgmental gaze on his family. The Nugents epitomize respectability, material wealth, and domestic stability, all things the Bradys lack. Even beyond Mrs. Nugent’s explicit involvement—in Bundoran, for example, when Joe betrays Francie’s friendship—her labeling of Francie creates a relationship of enslavement in which Francie must act always in response to her characterization of him. When Francie is thrown out of Joe’s boarding school, he imagines “a pair of thin lips saying...there’s nothing you can do that will ever bring him back again isn’t that true...you little piggy baby pig. Yes Mrs. Nugent,” he responds. “It is” (204). In her absence, Mrs. Nugent’s rhetorical power keeps Francie down. As he terrorizes and looks in on the Nugent family, Francie feels like “flies...looking in at...beautiful cakes and not being able to get at them” (61). Even in his delusions, he can only exist on the Nugent’s level when he is with his Uncle Alo who, like Mrs. Nugent, speaks with an “English accent” and has allegedly found prosperity in England (22).

McCabe’s portrait of this Irish community thus suggests that the rhetoric of English superiority far outlasts Britain’s imperial grip on the Irish colony. In the age of nationalist

counter-rhetoric, the Nugents also exemplify the domestic happiness of hearth and home de Valera calls for in the Irish Republic—the domestic prosperity and happiness the Bradys lack. Francie’s mother’s suicide is prefigured of course in the playing of the novel’s eponymous ballad in which the heroine is found “hanging from a rope.” The ballad’s lyrics—which Francie’s mother knows “inside out” (20)—tell of love’s undoing and a woman wishing “in vain” to be “a maid again.” Carole Zucker notes in “The Poetics of Point of View: Neil Jordan’s *The Butcher Boy*” that “the words of the ballad address Ma’s feelings of regretfulness and despondency in her dismal and ultimately doomed marriage.”⁷⁵ Like the woman of the ballad, Francie’s mother—not unlike her husband and son—is unable to achieve the desired return to a state of purity and happiness. The breakdown of domestic happiness in the ballad—“now with me he will not stay”—in fact connects the ballad specifically to Francie’s own feelings of loss. After his second release from the institution, Francie goes to the river and “count[s] all the people that were gone” (174). Like his mother, Francie returns at the height of his insanity to the playing of the ballad—it is “just like ma singing away” and, ironically, offers Francie the only sense of family togetherness the Bradys ever achieve (224). Theirs is rather a home rife with domestic abuse and disappointment.

In several key moments of disrupted mental stability, the state of the Brady family home mirrors their position in the community. When Francie returns from Dublin to find that his mother has committed suicide, he finds “the sink full of pilchard tins” which his dad is known to eat during drinking binges. The tins have “flies buzzing round them. There was curdled milk and books thrown round all over the place and stuff pulled out of the cupboards” (46). The house is in complete disarray, reflecting the breakdown of the family and the final mental breakdown from which Francie’s mother will not recover. McCabe textually juxtaposes this

scene of domestic brutishness and filth with a description of the Nugent house as Francie looks in. There he sees “a table with books and a pair of spectacles,” a “table set for breakfast... a butter dish with a special knife, a bluestriped jug with matching cups.” More importantly, Francie notes that “just by being the Nugents it all came together as if by magic not a thing out of place” (47). That the Nugents enjoy perfection of hearth and home is linked to their essential virtues of wealth, civility, and an imitative Englishness that threaten the characteristically stage-Irish Francie Brady.

In a defensive reflex, likely cultivated by a rhetoric demanding necessary Irish stability, the Brady family as well attempts to stave off or correct psychotic instability by focusing attention on domestic matters. After returning from the institution following her initial breakdown, Francie’s mother concentrates her efforts on fixing a party for Uncle Alo—significantly the only supposedly respectable element of the Brady family. “It got so bad,” Francie says, “you nearly had to tunnel your way into the house with all the cakes” (21). Much later in the novel, after Francie comes back from the school for “bad bastards” where he too is supposed to learn civility and stability, Francie replicates his mother’s behavior—he sets about cleaning the house and doing the shopping, intent on taking care of his father who, we later find out, is lying dead in the house. Francie’s attempt to make everything right begins with “humming away happily as [he] spread[s] the butter on the bread” and makes corned beef sandwiches for his dead father (139). It is now up to Francie “and nobody else” to show “what the Bradys are made of”—that is, that they can keep a clean and civilized home abundant with good food and fellowship like the Nugents’ (128). Francie, like his mother before him, must now take over the charge of not “letting people down” (134). This concern-turned-obsession of Francie’s reflects the pressure he feels to put forth an image of stability like that which he

observes in the Nugents and his other neighbors. His mother, at the height of her insanity, feels this same pressure—“We’ll show them—won’t we Francie? They’ll envy us yet! We’re the Bradys. Francie! The Bradys!” (19).

The Brady family’s inability to sustain, or even create, any type of stable domestic relations ultimately labels them inadequate to represent the new Irish nation and thus outcast from the proper community. That the family is disabled by improperly treated mental illness suggests, though, monumental forces beyond Francie’s control and unacknowledged by the community that judges him. In continually linking Francie’s psychosis to Mrs. Nugent’s piggish colonial rhetoric and her family’s supposedly model behavior, McCabe also links a pattern of Irish disability to the impairments—physical, mental, and emotional—engendered by British imperial domination of the Irish people. That this disability—both metaphorical and pathological—persists in the Irish Free State and the Republic reminds us of Ireland’s postcoloniality and the ways in which this history inflects later Irish nationalism. Imperialism, as Edward Said suggests, “courses on, as it were, belatedly and in different forms...but the relationship of domination continues”⁷⁶ during the postcolonial phase of liberation that the Irish Republic, as we see it in McCabe’s novel, has not quite “conquered.” Rather than moving “beyond national consciousness” to a truly liberated state, Irish nationalism has itself become the colonizing force to the Irish citizens who don’t fit within its purview.

The novel’s climax thus appropriately presents a bifurcated national image. As Francie is preparing to murder Mrs. Nugent and hopefully expel the feelings of inadequacy that seem to have driven him insane, the town is preparing for the appearance of the Virgin Mary, foretold in a vision to a local girl. The town is all pride—“it’s not every town the Mother of God comes to visit” (207). The hypocrisy disturbs Francie as much as any of Mrs. Nugent’s insults.

“Everybody was all holy now,” he says. Suddenly the town that has oppressed, ridiculed, and shamed him “looked like the brightest, happiest town in the whole world” with the townspeople “all in this together” (208). A loudspeaker blares “Faith of Our Fathers” which Francie calls “a fuck up of a hymn” (205).

National and religious pride have converged in this moment when the community, a small-scale representation of the larger Irish Republic, will be officially validated and revered. Amidst this national hype, Francie confronts Mrs. Nugent, “[lifts] her off the floor with one hand and [shoots] the bolt right into her head *thlok*.” He “[opens] her then...and [writes] PIGS all over the walls” (209). In the moment before he kills, Francie receives his greatest reward, a look on Mrs. Nugent’s face that finally recognizes those, like the Bradys, who “try to cry out and they can’t they don’t know how” (209). Francie and his family have been smothered, their voices marginalized or silenced completely by the very narrative of success and ability initially offered to liberate the nation from a history of oppression. Just as the townspeople celebrate a nation built on spiritual principles and worthy of saintly visitation, Francie’s violent outburst and the horror of Mrs. Nugent’s murder suggest a madness the national image cannot fully conceal. At the same time, Francie exemplifies the nationalist narrative’s all-encompassing reach. Caught up in his anger, Francie yells “Fuck you...and The Blessed Virgin!” But, still trained to fear this sacrilege, Francie the murderer immediately takes back this final slur—“I didn’t mean to say that” (217).

In his last triumph, Francie, after murdering Mrs. Nugent, imagines what Mr. Nugent’s reaction will be when he returns home that evening. “I wonder what it will be—rashers and eggs maybe or one of her special steak and kidney pies,” Mr. Nugent will muse. “But,” Francie thinks, “poor old Mr Nugent he’d have a long wait before he got one of them again” (213). In

this fantasy, Francie achieves the ultimate revenge—he has disrupted the routine of domestic perfection Mrs. Nugent’s mere existence has been constantly holding over him. Despite this victory, though, Francie is unable to adequately fix his own domestic space. Like his mother, he does, at the height of his insanity, embark upon the “hard work” of “touch[ing] up” the house (221). At this point, however, we and Francie realize that his house and family—representatives of the domestic space and the national ideal—cannot be cleansed. In a dark twist, then, Francie gathers up the family’s possessions—his own body atop the pile—and sets them on fire. This self-immolation is the ultimate manifestation of Francie’s doomed existence. His mental illness and the breakdown of the Irish family/community displayed in the novel suggest an ultimate refusal of the ideals on which the Irish nation has been founded. Francie Brady’s murderous tirade and self-immolation present a destructive end for those cursed by the rhetoric of disability and betray Ireland’s inability to foster progressive development and treat mental disease. This breakdown’s incarnation in physical violence against oneself and one’s community further emphasizes the self-enforced sterility of the Irish nation.

“the knowledge of impotence” :
Broken Bodies in Beckett’s Fiction (And Its Fictions)

Samuel Beckett, Vivian Mercier writes, “is a special kind of Irishman—Protestant, suburban, middle-class, but brought up and for the most part educated in what is now the Republic.”⁷⁷ Like his compatriots Wilde, Shaw, Synge, and Yeats, Beckett is strangely yet distinctly Irish, Mercier believes, in the tension he inevitably exhibits both personally and artistically toward Ireland and the question of Irishness. Like many Beckett critics, Mercier suggests that Beckett acknowledges Irish literature and history always “only in order to reject

it.”⁷⁸ This view would imply that Beckett’s Irishness is clearly that of the expatriate rather than the postcolonial advocate. In *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers*, Hugh Kenner seems to suggest the same—Beckett, he says, is “not part of Irish [literature], certainly,” and had the “good fortune...to come in late, when the shaping enthusiasms seemed quaint and remote and [when] how Mayo peasants should behave on stage was no longer an urgent issue.” In fact, Beckett’s place in history encourages a view of Revival politics and even the “untended wreckage of the post office” that “emblemized...demolition, not glory.” Kenner does note even more importantly, though, that Beckett’s “universality”—or seeming lack of the particularly Irish—“has local roots, in the Ireland of the running-down of the Revival.”⁷⁹ Proper behavior of the Irish peasantry may be obsolete in Beckett’s time, but his characters certainly betray a knowledge that such superficial descriptions of Irishness once captivated a fledgling nation’s attention.

Beckett’s distance from seemingly Catholic passions and the Revival rhetoric of his predecessors allows instead for a body of literature distinctly Irish in its rejection of Irish idealism and its necessary obsession with the violence sustained and perpetrated in the name of the Irish nation. Though Molloy’s flippant suggestion that emotions unknown or unintelligible are “so much Gaelic to me”⁸⁰ asserts an indifference to and scorn for a recoverable Irish past, it as well demands an examination of such loss and such a historically desperate desire for recovery. That Beckett’s characters desire not to participate in these revivalist and later republican fantasies does not diminish Beckett’s role in addressing these tensions. Beckett’s Ireland, much like McCabe’s, displays the disability and dissatisfaction that is inevitably rejected by traditional Irish nationalism. An Irish Beckett, as John P. Harrington admits, “may cheer some, but the Ireland in Beckett may dismay many.”⁸¹

Physical disability, social containment, and desirable sterility find their most blatant Irish expression in Beckett's fiction. In the Unnamable's "I can't go on, I'll go on," Beckett epitomizes both the inability of productive development and, more importantly, the constitutive role of narratives—religious, cultural, national, individual—in framing subjectivity and "normal" ability. Indeed, the inherent disability Beckett displays in his fiction is coupled always with Beckett's portrayal of the psychological and physical dependence on the narratives of progression that purport to codify ability and thus supposedly sufficient development. Beckett's fiction thus illustrates the insufficiently developed individual contained within these narratives that both promote and condemn his mental and physical disability. Most importantly, Beckett's incapable Irish subject is kept alive and defined by the very narratives of violent masculinity, historical/material development, and national overcoming he simultaneously rejects and creates. Beckett's Malone, the quintessential infirmed postcolonial storyteller, remains imprisoned in the ideology of modern Irish society as he is marginalized (via institutionalization) yet contained within it. His struggle for narrative freedom is thwarted by the sterility of normative narratives of progression and his narrated life plays out repeatedly the struggle for power and presence reflected from the Revival's first impulses to freedom through postcolonial Irish literature of national oppression.

Despite his desire to escape such master-narratives of ability, progress, and development, Malone's comfort subsists only in his telling of stories that grapple with these very issues. In *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, Richard Begam rightfully suggests that "*Malone Dies* is forever vacillating between the work of introspection and the game of narration," a vacillation, Begam notes, necessary to maintain "the opposition between storytelling and self-reflection."⁸² As Begam also notes—and as the novel makes quite explicit—Malone is unable to escape his

own presence in favor of his characters. While Begam emphasizes the indelible link here between narrator and narrated, I suggest the body as a sort of third term, an undeniable presence that continually demands Malone's attention and thus often thwarts and influences his ability as narrator. Beckett's narrative here, the novel itself, alternates appropriately between Malone's attempt to construct narratives that supercede nationally-inscribed notions of development and Malone's experience of his own crippled and impotent body. In this sometimes jarring oscillation, *Malone Dies* makes most explicit Beckett's ever-present comingling of bodily deterioration and social narratives of acceptable ability. Before and beyond Malone's explicit incarceration, we confront a slew of Beckett characters whose broken bodies reflect an Irish Beckett's desire to expose a history of trauma.

Murphy, the title character of Beckett's first novel, appears on the scene sitting "naked in his rocking-chair" while "seven scarves [hold] him in position" so that "only the most local movements [are] possible."⁸³ Murphy has devised his own system of restraint, one that he hopes will appease his body and thus "set him free in his mind" (2). Beckett's next title character, the Irish servant Watt, appears through the gaze of another as an unstructured lump of material, possibly human but, as Mr. Hackett notes, possibly "a parcel, a carpet...or a roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper."⁸⁴ This ambiguity suggests from the start a link between the physical body and a less physical essence of identification and self-possession. Beckett's fiction continues through his post-war trilogy to meditate on the problematics of identifying, containing, and sustaining the body. Many of his characters are beaten and crippled; others struggle to restrict their own bodily movements. All of them recognize the inescapable connection between mind and body—a critical connection always perceived though never completely understood. Beyond this metaphysical question, we can view the disabled body in Beckett's fiction as

mirroring the physical and cultural violence perpetrated through British imperialism and the Irish nationalism that followed in its wake. Beckett's characters, despite efforts to escape this history and their present suffering, remain ensconced in the narratives of normalcy, domesticity, and material achievement that frame republican fantasies of successful nationhood. Beckett's aching bodies and the proliferation in his fiction of fictions themselves stunted and sterile suggest an indictment of an Irish national rhetoric framed still by the invention of an Ireland that is able-bodied, able-governed, and sufficiently modern to reject its formerly colonized image.

In his essay "Political Beckett?"—capped, we should note, with a question mark—Terry Eagleton surveys the Beckett oeuvre with an eye toward unmasking a politically engaged Beckett beneath a traditional discourse of humanist, philosophical, and poststructuralist criticism.⁸⁵ Eagleton's attempt is by now nothing shocking—the last few decades have brought a concern with an Irish Beckett that presents not a generalized modern condition, but rather a specifically Irish impoverishment and despair. And yet, as Jim Hansen asserts in *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett*, any "suggestion that the aporias of Irish experience—particularly the colonial experience—are as central to Beckett's work as they are to Joyce's remains subject to debate."⁸⁶ In *The Irish Beckett*—a work clearly invested in divulging a historical Beckett and a work that traces its critical roots to the 1950s—Harrington admits that "an obvious characteristic of Samuel Beckett's major works...is the relative absence of references specific to Ireland or, for that matter, to any particular locality" (143).

Harrington's assent to this oft-cited lack precedes of course an analysis which rightfully concludes that "the local Irish contexts of Beckett's novels indicates that their ontological view is social and is historical" (168). Harrington's proof of the Irish Beckett comes often through a belaboring catalogue of Irish referents that maintain the "resilience of someplace" despite the

characters' desire to transcend such "social and historical entanglements" (169). This residue remains, perhaps, beyond yet because of Beckett's own tension regarding the land of his birth. In a 1936 letter to Mary Manning Howe, Beckett writes in a seemingly exasperated tone—"Ireland? I feel nothing but the dread at having to return."⁸⁷ This disdain for all things Irish does not, however, weaken the presence of Ireland in Beckett's narratives. Rather, I would argue, it exemplifies and intensifies the debilitating environment his characters must navigate. Beckett's bodies and the physical suffering that accompanies emotional alienation in his texts mark as well the residue of historical experience. The disabled body, like the impoverished landscape, reflects an Irish nation scarred by historical violence and further stunted by confining national narratives. In describing typical Beckett characters, Eagleton asserts that "they are more body than soul—mechanical assemblages of body parts...in which human bodies betray a distressing tendency to merge into bicycles" (68). This emphasis on the physicality of Beckett's characters is well-noted—we must also add that the bodies in Beckett's fiction more often than not merge with broken machinery that is no longer able to perform its function with any efficacy.

The body itself becomes a liability in Beckett's fiction and, I would argue, a repository of pain, confusion, and limitation. As Eagleton points out, "there is in fact no death in Beckett's work, merely a steady disintegration as the body continues to peel and stiffen" (73). In his final answering of the initial question—is there a political Beckett?—Eagleton reads Beckett's work as reflective not of "some timeless *condition humaine*" but rather as a quite historically inflected reflection of "war-torn twentieth-century Europe" (69). Despite this emphasis, Eagleton allows that Beckett's "stagnant landscapes" are both "post-Auschwitz" and "a subliminal memory of famished Ireland." Eagleton's Irish connection relies on a remembered Irish landscape that backdrops Beckett's plays. We can also read the body, I suggest, as a physical site on which

historical violence—both colonial and national—is registered. The struggle for psychic and physical control, the constant threat of violence, and the traumatized fear of subjection all suggest another reading of Beckett that while accounting for a modern crisis of subjectivity and questions concerning the mind/body split also foregrounds the seven centuries of colonial history that have left the scars of violence on the Irish body itself. Eagleton asks why, in a “post-Auschwitz” world of ambiguity, “sheer physical pain should be so brutally persistent” (72). The answer, I suggest, is in a concern with the body that marks not necessarily a political Beckett but a historical or postcolonial Beckett invested in the trauma of dispossession, imprisonment, and both imperial and national violence against body and culture.

Much has been made of the mind/body connection in Beckett’s early fiction, as Beckett himself foregrounds the issue. *Murphy*, Beckett’s first novel, indeed meditates on the relationship of mind and body and suggests long before *The Unnamable* that silence of the mind is the goal toward which Beckett’s characters will reach. “Murphy’s mind,” Beckett says, “pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain” (107). As the explanations continue, they frequently turn in upon themselves and expose flaws in Murphy’s system—Murphy, we are then informed, is willing to accept a merely “partial [congruence] of the world of his mind with the world of his body” as long as this caveat does not upset the important distinction that his “mind [is] a closed system...and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body.” Murphy’s mind, he would like us to believe, is “bodytight” (109). Murphy’s retreat to the mental hospital and eventual death during a stint of mind-freeing meditation suggest that Murphy’s philosophy does not work and clearly does not present a triumphant alternative to mind/body entanglement. The joke is ultimately on Murphy whose scattered ashes, Beckett

notes, leave “the body, mind and soul of Murphy” on the floor of an English pub to mingle with “the glass, the matches, the spits, [and] the vomit” (275). Murphy’s philosophy and his practice of physically restraining the body in order to free the mind look forward to many Beckett characters who, like the narrator of his nouvelle *First Love*, desire “supineness in the mind.”⁸⁸ *Murphy* looks forward as well to many characters unable to control mental chaos or to emulate the Cartesian mind/body split Murphy espouses. As Beckett’s fiction continues, the body further breaks down and intrudes upon the mind, and the mind increasingly relies on the body for proof of its own existence. Beckett’s ultimate critique comes, then, through the broken bodies his characters inhabit. They prove through suffering and impotence an existence inescapably sterile and impoverished.

In his classic yet still relevant analysis *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, Kenner suggests that Beckett’s characters reflect the breakdown of the ideal Cartesian subject. In a chapter entitled “The Cartesian Centaur,” Kenner focuses, as have many critics, on the proliferation of bicycles in Beckett’s fiction. The man on a bicycle, Kenner notes, represents “Cartesian Man in excelsis, the Cartesian Centaur, body and mind in close harmony: the mind set on...the contemplation of immutable relativities...the body a reduction to uncluttered terms of the quintessential machine.”⁸⁹ In this formulation we see the body, represented by the bicycle, as “the supreme Cartesian achievement, a product of pure intelligence, which has preceded it in time and now dominates it in function” (123). The mind’s primacy in this formulation, its position as the most important essence, is an ideal Kenner relates to the cyclist moving swiftly through space on his bicycle. This ideal, we can easily note, is perpetually broken down in Beckett’s fiction where the bicycle is always broken or breaking, represented metonymically by a single part such as the bicycle horn, or used with complete inefficiency by its rider.

Kenner's quite brilliant study unravels Murphy's philosophy—as Beckett himself does in *Murphy* the novel—and highlights the body, not the mind, as the primary essence that can find the place of rest that the mind so desperately seeks. The Unnamable seems the most bodiless and physically unstructured entity of Beckett's fiction, a body at times hardly recognizable as such. And yet, amidst a constant stream of thoughts and words, the Unnamable returns to the body for identification and a guarantor of existence. “I,” the Unnamable says, “of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly.” What follows is a litany of physical descriptions—“I am seated, my hands on my knees...My spine is not supported”—that are irrefutable even in Beckett's world. Without the “testimony of my palms, my soles,” the Unnamable says, “I would gladly give myself the shape...of an egg” (304-5). Beckett's characters are, as *Texts for Nothing* notes, “prisoner[s], frantic with corporeality,” a bodily existence that works only to contain and inhibit the impulse to freedom from rhetorical and historical constraints (123).

The corporality of Beckett's characters returns us always, then, to the body as receptor of violence and trauma. Beckett's early fiction fixates on the condition of the dispossessed who are culturally marginalized, physically beaten, and ultimately imprisoned. The obsessive and compulsive tendencies of Beckett's characters can be read certainly as diseases of the mind, but I suggest that they too act as an expression of bodily containment and an attempt, sometimes feeble, to exert control where Beckett's characters have none. Beckett's fiction charts exactly this transition from physical submission via expulsion to an imprisonment of mind and body that disables the individual's ability to narrate his own existence. Along this road we meet a man counting steps, a man sucking stones, a man listing possessions—all three and many others

compensate for bodily injury with mental attempts to wrest back control from a master and identify themselves.

Beckett's novella *The Expelled* begins with a classic Beckettian compulsion—"There were not many steps. I had counted them a thousand times, both going up and coming down...I did not know where to begin nor where to end...I arrived therefore at three totally different figures" (46). The narrator's note that "even for the child there were not many [steps]" suggests that this obsessive counting is nothing new. This mental compulsion quickly blends with physical violence. The point of this meditation, of there not being many steps, is that "the fall was therefore not serious" (47). The narrator fears his tormentors will chase him into the street but is glad to find that "for once, they had confined themselves to throwing [him] out" (47). It seems the narrator is "the expelled," repeatedly tossed from the house to which he never turned back when leaving but toward which he turns back with longing after the expulsion. We must note the pun later when the narrator observes the inhabitants' indifference to his plight—"they had all," he says, "resumed their occupations" (49). "The expelled" and his fictional "descendants" are left to wander the streets as best they can. Like Molloy, "the expelled" walks only with pain and difficulty—he has "stiffness of the lower limbs...extraordinary splaying of the feet" and suffers often "a loss of equilibrium" (50). This physical aching is countered only by the constant threat of authority—he is stopped twice by a policeman, the second so "similar in all respects to the first" that he wonders "whether it was not the same one" (52). The policemen, like the expulsions, are typecast here as a way of life for Beckett's characters. They are defined not by their own authority but by that of those who would usurp their territory and injure the body that remains.⁹⁰

This dispossession and physical threat is present always in Beckett's fiction through the master-slave dichotomy, present nowhere so clearly as in *Watt*. As many of Beckett's characters are often at the mercy of an ambiguous dominator, Watt, protagonist and title character of his own novel, is quite literally a servant in the presumed Irish Big House of Mr. Knott. As has often been noted, the Irish Big House doubly epitomizes Irish violence and destruction, representing both the presence of a colonizing intruder and eventually the destruction of that culture by a militant and brutal Irish nationalism. Watt's confusion is most disturbing in this context. Like Molloy who comes after and Malone after him, Watt "never [knows] how he got into Mr. Knott's house. He [knows] that he got in by the back door" but "never, never...how the backdoor came to be opened" (37). He is in a state of perpetual servitude to the master who does not come and go but rather "abide[s] in his place" with the impression that he will never leave (57). Throughout his stay at Mr. Knott's, Watt is preoccupied with the systems of control he sees exercised around him. The interchangeability of servants in Mr. Knott's house and the rational irrationalism Watt observes suggest a historical parallel to the ongoing mastery of British rule in Ireland and the view of the Irish people as incapable of asserting any sufficient form of control over their own development.

This overt master-slave structure has not, however, been received without critical controversy. In *Chronicles of Disorder*, David Weisberg—previously having warned of *Watt* as "a static, transitional work whose value is more symptomatic than substantive"—suggests both that "[*Watt*] has no need to create a...sociological or outer existence" and that "two of the concrete terms propping up this narrated ambiguity are *master* and *servant*."⁹¹ His critique of *Watt*'s "reductive social imagery" is confirmed by his own reading of *Watt*'s "*master* and *servant*" as "reductive emblems of social hierarchy that fill in, barely, for the novel's geopolitical

void" (47). This offhand dismissal is unnerving, however, in that Watt's existence of servitude is precisely that which binds him to Beckett's later incarnations and ushers in an Irish history neither Watt nor Beckett seem content to ignore. Watt, Weisberg insists, "has no class consciousness" and, amidst a society composed only of the master and "a series of replaceable servants," functions only "to signify, and be subsumed in, a pervasive ambiguity" (47-8). This powerlessness, though Weisberg dismisses it, may be exactly the point Beckett is emphasizing with Watt's seemingly ungrounded existence. Watt's lack of control and awareness are reflected further in his inability to effectively communicate, comprehend his surroundings, and exist independently of the master and what feeble comforts he offers. Like the literally confined narrators that succeed him, Watt is the first in a series of Beckett "servants" contained by a social structure that always subsumes individual thought and ability.

In a now famous essay on the postcolonial Beckett, David Lloyd notes that "inauthenticity is...the perpetual condition of the colonized: dominated, interpreted, mediated by another." The "purest sign of inauthenticity," writes Lloyd, is "to be made or read by another, to be given meaning."⁹² Beckett's trilogy of novels exemplifies the inauthenticity of which Lloyd writes and the threat of authority and oppression Beckett lays out in his earlier fiction. Molloy, like Watt, does not know how he got to his mother's room, only that "[he'd] never have got there alone." He is watched over by an authority he refers to only as "they"—only one man comes, but Molloy is certain "there is more than one" (7). Colonial references abound in the trilogy, as Molloy, well in line with Lloyd's theory of the inauthentic colonial, is interpreted by his captor who removes the pages from his room and brings them back "marked with signs [Molloy] doesn't understand." In the imperial tradition of humanizing—that is, making human—the Irish brute, the "powers that be," as Malone calls them, wash the smell off Molloy,

while he is sleeping or otherwise unaware, and perfume him with lavender. Upon regaining his senses, Molloy finds that the door is locked and the window barred (38). He, like Malone, is a prisoner at the mercy of an outside authority. Life before this imprisonment was no less restricting and violent—Molloy has “gone in fear all [his] life, in fear of blows” (22).

The Unnamable is likewise subjected to a cultural and physical remodeling to suit the oppressor’s desire—“The lectures they gave me,” he says, “before they even began trying to assimilate me...What I speak of, what I speak with, all comes from them....It’s of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language.” The end goal, in the Unnamable’s own words, is that he “not...be able to open [his] mouth without proclaiming them, and [their] fellowship...It’s a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can’t bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed” (324). His assertion that they have even “inflicted the notion of time on [him]” quite clearly expresses a postcolonial critique of a normative European concept of progression and development. Though Beckett does not present a triumphant alternative but rather subsists here in the fulfillment of being unfulfilled, he does clearly, through his fiction, critique the colonial enterprise and suggest that the Irish body registers the trauma of historical violence as distortion, dysfunction and pain. In *Malone Dies*, a text simultaneously obsessed with physical disintegration and narrative progression, we encounter most fully a residue of imperial domination and national violence that structures, maintains, invalidates, and frustrates any desire to escape the realities of Irish history.

Before launching Malone’s role as author and storyteller, *Malone Dies* follows from Beckett’s previous fiction in introducing yet another infirmed, disoriented, and dejected Irish specimen. That Malone emphatically asserts that his space of confinement is “not a room in a hospital, or in a madhouse” only heightens the ambiguity of his circumstance and perhaps the

insidiousness of his imprisonment. He is contained and supervised possibly at the behest “of the powers that be” (182), and his treatment over time has deteriorated along with his physical condition. That Malone feels he “must be on...guard against throes” and is “less given to them now, since coming here” (179) suggests that his physical confinement reflects a larger desire to silence and contain him. While he is imprisoned, he is subdued, subsisting only through the control of some others and, though promising to “not speak of [his] sufferings,” unable to quiet his own lamentations (186). His present physical state is defined not by presence but by absence—by disability rather than ability:

A few words about myself perhaps. My body is what is called, unadvisedly perhaps, impotent. There is virtually nothing it can do....My arms, once they are in position, can exert a certain force. But I find it hard to guide them. Perhaps the red nucleus has faded. I tremble a little, but only a little....My sight and hearing are very bad, on the vast main no light but reflected gleams....I am far from the sounds of blood and breath, immured....That which is seen, that which cries and writhes, my witless remains. Somewhere in this turmoil thought struggles on, it too wide of the mark....Such would seem to be my present state. (186)

Malone’s state of physical existence does not deviate much from this initial description. Though he begins later to feel “deep down in [his] trunk...pains that seem new,” these, like the others, are “bearable” and do not seem cause for alarm (198). In fact, Malone views these seeming disabilities in a rather favorable light—“I would willingly attribute part of my shall I say my misfortunes to this disordered sense were I not unfortunately rather inclined to look upon it as a blessing. Misfortunes, blessings, I have no time,” he says, “to pick my words” (207). The body in *Malone Dies* is thus both central and peripheral to Malone’s state as it is crucial to Beckett’s project. Though Malone feigns indifference to his pain, his mere existence exemplifies the reality of physical suffering and the metaphorical reflection of social regression both central to Beckett’s critique of Irish nationalism. Disability, in Beckett’s fiction, is the common state of being. Rather than standing out as disabled—like Francie does in *The Butcher Boy*—Malone

reflects (and reflects on in his stories) a never-ending stream of crippled, delusional, and disenfranchised Irish.⁹³ Malone's primary role as narrator demands we examine, then, the relationship Beckett weaves between narrative and disability. Telling stories is Malone's only hope of comfort. He "look[s] forward to their giving [him] great satisfaction" (180). The content of Malone's stories suggests, however, a complete inability to extricate himself from the master-narratives in which he has been unknowingly ensconced.

Here then, through the fictions of Beckett's fiction, we find Beckett's ultimate critique of fictions themselves. Malone, seemingly excommunicated from the rhetoric of Irish cultural revivalism, returns despite exasperating dismay to the very issues of mid-century Irish nationalism he scathingly rejects. "In his country," Malone starts, "the problem—no, I can't do it. The peasants....I can't" (196). And yet, Malone does "do it" again and again. Wishing to exist beyond these classic Irish constructions of character and environment, he continually narrates characters that strive for and grapple with an image of the Irish nation that contains and rejects them. Malone creates these "vice-existers," as Begam calls them, to distract from his own existence and is pleased with the game of storytelling "only so long as [he] the narrator is engaged in diversion rather than introspection" (Begam 127). But this, we see, is rarely the case. Malone's characters are largely as disabled, suffering, and outcast as he. On the level of both rhetorical and historical critique, Beckett uses Malone's fictional incarnations only to further emphasize the sterility of Irish narratives and reject the imagined bounds of national ability and progression into which Malone does not fit. As Harrington notes, "Malone's stories call into question, among other things, that venture of discovering an indigenous national culture fundamental to the Irish literary revival" (162). Malone's stories indeed parody, indict, and critique—as they do imperialism, occupation, and foreign subjugation—national ideals of

cultural purity and domestic tranquility the Irish Republic has carried over from the imagined community of the Irish cultural revival.

Though Malone intends stories about a man, a woman, a thing, and an animal, his first tale, detailing the pursuits of the Saposcat family, at least initially presents as a sort of broken coming-of-age narrative about the Saposcat's teen-aged son "Sapo." Physically, Sapo recalls Malone's own flailing body—his movements "were rather those of one floundering in a quag" (205). Intellectually, Sapo's growth depends largely on his success at examinations, a prospect Malone quickly dispels—"He was not good at his lessons, neither could he see the use of them. He attended his classes with his mind elsewhere, or blank" (186). Sapo, we find out, is given to wandering and dreaming, desiring not the type of material success his parents crave but rather the freedom to, like Malone, be formless and unburdened. Despite Sapo's indolence and indifference to the established modes of learning and development—he often "sneered at his teachers and sometimes even gave them impertinent answers" (189)—he is ensnared at home in exactly the kind of material and domestic aspirations that define the type of upwardly mobile Irish middle class Beckett is critiquing here.

The energetically and mentally anemic Sapo descends of course from "sickly parents" who, in addition to being of poor health, obsess relentlessly about their poor social standing and the desire to acquire material comforts that will presumably empower them. The Saposcats, Malone says, live a life "full of axioms, of which one at least established the criminal absurdity of a garden without roses and with its paths and lawns uncared for" (187). Malone emphasizes in this description that the Saposcats, as lethargic and impotent as their son, cling auspiciously to an image of respectability and domestic perfection they certainly do not embody. In their inability to achieve an acceptable degree of financial and familial security, the Saposcats instead

brood on “the time it was taking [their] son to command a salary” (188) and pray earnestly that he pass his exams and take to medicine or the law. After all, they assume, “a more or less normal if unintelligent youth, once admitted to the study of these professions, was almost sure to be certified, sooner or later” (210). Throughout this description of the Saposcats’ ambition, Malone’s sarcasm and Beckett’s scorn show through. The Saposcats, Malone says, “drew the strength to live from the prospect of their impotence” (188). They, unlike the hearty and healthy Irish nation imagined by the Republic, have no wish to toil for their success. They cling rather to an image of stability that they desire without the least ability to attain it. That Sapo likewise refuses the traditionally-accepted path for his development suggests continued regression and highlights the imposing weight of social and physical impotence. Though Sapo is in very few ways unlike Malone—Sapo, for example, “would not let himself be struck” while Malone has so often received “blows” (190, 185)—Sapo will inevitably meet the similar fate of abandonment, incarceration, and degeneration that defines the incapable Irish subject.

If the Saposcats reflect back to Beckett’s readers a negative image of middle-class mid-century Irish respectability and social ambition, Malone’s next family—the Lamberts—look back further to the oft-idealized and rarely scrutinized existence of the romanticized Irish peasant. Though, as we have seen, Malone previously rejects the notion of discussing peasant life and succumbing to this cliché of Irish storytelling, Sapo’s path inevitably crosses the Lambert family that serves Beckett’s desire to expose the erroneous assumptions of a cultural nationalism built on a nostalgia for a primitive, indigenous, and noble Irish peasantry. Though the Lamberts’ simplicity indeed suggests a primitive culture beyond the reach of modern influence, it does so to ends unimagined by the Revivalists, like Yeats, who championed the notion of the beggar’s nobility. The Lamberts, like O’Brien’s Gaels, represent a pre-modern,

animalistic and depraved existence that continually bolsters and affirms the imperial rhetoric that for so long condemned Ireland to servitude. Beckett in fact references *The Poor Mouth's* facetious nostalgia in his description of Lambert's father—"His like will not be seen again," Big Lambert would say, "once I am gone" (200). In this mock nostalgia for a generation even more primitive and ill-equipped than Big Lambert himself, Beckett poignantly critiques not only the notion of an ideal Ireland but also the very desire to progress upon narratives of past purity and triumph. Malone, like Beckett's other characters, at times falls prey to nostalgia, but it is exposed always as itself a useless construct that harkens back to comforting but false narratives.

Like O'Brien before him and anticipating McCabe, Beckett scaffolds the Lamberts' narrative with a rhetoric of disability and piggishness that recalls Irish impotence as it continually critiques revivalist sentimentality. Like the plight of O'Brien's Gaels and their middle-class counterpart the Saposcats, the Lamberts, Malone notes, find it "difficult to live," by which he means "to make ends meet" (199). They are likewise physically crippled—"Big Lambert had not a tooth in his head"—prone to fits of violence, mired in domestic dysfunction represented largely by incessant talk of incest and familial violence, and more at home among the animals they both care for and slaughter than in conversation with each other. Like later pig butcher Francie Brady, Big Lambert seems especially to fuse with the pigs that both fascinate and appall him. With great pride he carries "knives so lovingly whetted" to slaughter the pigs and then "for days afterwards" can "speak of nothing but the pig he had just dispatched" (200) while his frightened family, like squealing piglets themselves, cower before him. Big Lambert, though dedicated to pig-bleeding and obsessed with this physical labor, is a far cry from the hard-working peasant upheld as the noble spirit of an ancient Gaelic aristocracy. Big Lambert's obsession with the "hollow, flooded" land and the struggling, squealing pigs reflects rather the

horrors of his own brutishness and an Irish peasantry at heart incapable of self control, self respect, or self sufficiency.

Beckett suggests also through the Lamberts' life of impotence and ignorance an Irish people unable to recognize their own enslavement. The Lamberts stand in, here, as representatives for both an Irish peasantry historically subdued by foreign occupiers and a modern Irish *bourgeoisie* intent on subduing and silencing those that reflect insufficiently developed national ability. In two particular vignettes, Malone decries Big Lambert's only noticeable talents—farming and slaughtering—to further expose his lack of empowerment and ability. Though extremely gifted at “sticking pigs” and destroying them, Lambert is completely ignorant of the proper way to raise a pig who is, in the end, worth sticking. His undue coddling of the pigs and refusal to allow them freedom enough to grow results each year in a crop of pigs “weak...blind and lean.” Though he insists, Malone notes ironically, in “upbraiding [the pig]...for its ingratitude,” it is Big Lambert who is to blame (201). His zealous control of the pigs only undermines his end goal and yields instead a product feeble and undernourished despite such intensely desired growth. Big Lambert's persistence in this errant logic alludes once again to a strategy of growth the Irish nation clings to despite growing evidence of sterility, regression, and failure. As he fails to produce a healthy brood for his slaughter, Big Lambert also relies repeatedly on disabled and dying animals to farm his land. The sadistic joy Big Lambert attains from working the dying mule to his death and forcefully beating it into the grave mocks, of course, the pathetic servitude he and his family exhibit toward the barren land they tend. They recall not a heroic Irish peasantry but rather a history in which the Irish are, like Lambert's mule, rescued from the door of the slaughterhouse only because they can “still be made to serve” a bit longer (212). As Big Lambert ironically prides himself on stretching the

sick mule's labor and slaughtering the anemic pigs he has raised, Mrs. Lambert's role in Malone's narrative is only the bearing of "diligent pains" and "unending weariness" (216). In yet another mockery of the domestic perfection Beckett's characters can never attain, the physically exhausted Mrs. Lambert is comforted only by "cling[ing] with her fingers to the worn table at which her family would soon be united, waiting for her to serve them, and to feel about her, ready for use, the lifelong pots and pans" (217).⁹⁴ Despite the very real dysfunction and inabilities the Lamberts display, they without thought or hesitation cling to a predetermined path of success and domestic happiness Malone, despite a distaste for such clichés, has penned for them. In this, they again mirror the Saposcats and more generally the Irish middle class that subsists in a failed pursuit to prove their national worth through the type of mock domestic success Beckett and McCabe critique in their writings.

The ambition to familial generation and material success clearly haunts these Irish narratives—Malone's as well as O'Brien's, Beckett's, and McCabe's—despite an underlying suspicion of its validity and a general failure to progress toward this ideal state. That these constructed parameters and the desire to fulfill them subsist beyond these refusals suggests most importantly the role of these "progressive" narratives in shaping national ideals and accepted communal boundaries. Beckett most clearly presents the ultimately disabled, disenfranchised, and impotent subjects, and yet they, too, seem bound by the demand for development and progeneration. The false comfort of domesticity and its likely components—companionship, love, home, family—is exposed nowhere more mercilessly than in Malone's story of Macmann and Moll. The last in Malone's line of lethargic, impotent anti-heroes, Macmann most closely resembles Malone himself as he suffers an existence defined aptly as "decomposition" (254). Macmann's physical and mental torment exceeds the more "realistic" everyday narratives into

which Malone has placed Sapo and Lambert. Macmann's suffering, with its fear and loathing even generally toward existence, makes us hope, along with Malone, that "this cannot possibly last much longer" (239). Macmann, like the Beckettian characters he comes after, is desperately afflicted of body and mind. He is assaulted by "paroxysms of hunger" (229) and lives "often in fear and trembling" (240), completely unable despite his efforts to gain physical comfort. As importantly for Beckett's uses, though Macmann seems removed from the domestic settings of the Saposcats and Lamberts, he instead finds himself in an asylum where the very same domestic tensions are played out to even more horrifying and meaningless ends.

In its very nature, the asylum epitomizes, of course, the ultimate in supervision, containment, and false stability. When Macmann awakens at St. John of God, he is told to no longer worry as "it is we shall think and act for you, from now forward." The same type of watchful "powers that be" who have supervised Molloy and Malone now "[swarm] about [Macmann's] bed, those in the rear rising on tiptoe and craning their necks to get a better view of him" (256). Anticipating McCabe's description of Francie's torment at the hands of curious medical students, this description of Macmann's current state suggests, as does Malone's own condition, an insidious desire to study, contain, and more importantly label those who have failed to live up to accepted social standards of normalcy and ability. It is indeed a "mere formality" that Macmann signs the contract committing himself to complete submission—he obeys out of fear and out of habit, the forces that drive all Beckettian compulsion to powerlessness and, more generally, mass submission to a supposedly beneficial authority. Beckett indeed develops a parallel here to the supposedly liberated Irish nation that has moved despite the horrors of rebellion and civil war from one unthinking authority to the next. Through Macmann's relationship with Moll, Beckett further emphasizes the absurdity of this controlling environment

and its role in preserving impotence rather than creating growth. Even in the asylum, the compulsion to normative relations and progeneration goes on even as physical and mental deterioration proliferates. The combination of Macmann's impotence and the spectacle of failed sex—they “copulate as best they could”—reinforces the notion that productive development is impossible, perhaps not even desired, amidst the horrors of bodily decomposition and spiritual degeneration (261). The gruesome references to Moll's decaying crucifix-embossed tooth and Macmann's tendency to write love poems elevating the “promised land / Of the nearest cemetery” further demonstrate Beckett's indictment of republican fantasies of happiness and self-sufficiency built on the allegedly desirable foundation of domestic success and religious indoctrination (262). Unlike Beckett's other texts, though, *Malone Dies* counters this bleak view of national paralysis with, I would suggest, a rather triumphant overcoming and suggestively postcolonial victory. Of all Malone's (and Beckett's) narrated subjects, Lemuel alone steps in to right the oppressive wrongs perpetrated by the supposedly righteous and validated through the state-sponsored censorship and supervision of insufficiently respectable national subjects.

In an appropriately Beckettian negation of stability and rationality, Lemuel represents a double incarnation of insane self-destruction and liberating conquest. In the final pages of *Malone Dies*, before the moment of Malone's potential death on which most readers focus, Beckett weaves through Malone's consciousness a final fiction of triumph in which the St. John of God inmates—in some cases mentally disabled, in all cases impotently confined—avenge their imprisonment through Lemuel's murder of the disingenuous Lady Pedal who patronizes them with insincere pity to further her own feelings of self worth. She, like others who occasionally reach out to the asylum's occupants, is “blessed in means and leisure” (281). Though she, like other respectable ladies, takes “an interest in the inmates,” her disdain is barely

hidden—she tries to speak cordially as “to show she was not superior” but ends up wondering with exasperation “what is the matter with them” because they will not join her singing of “Christ is King / Oh the happy happy hours” (285). Lemuel’s murderous tirade against Lady Pedal and Maurice, the apparent supervisors of this outing, is cheered on by the other inmates in a wild frenzy of insane rebellion. As Malone himself begins to lose consciousness, his final fictional avatars break out of their subjected state and, with a violence befitting their own violent treatment, wreck havoc on the representatives of respectable society that dare confront those they have previously pushed aside. Like Francie’s murderous triumph, though, Lemuel’s actions represent only a momentary and itself impotent resolution. Malone’s championing of the disenfranchised and disabled does, however, continue Beckett’s tradition of exposing a “hidden Ireland” that negates rather than endorses a republican image of national unity, stability, and strength.

The literature of mid-century Ireland, conceived long after England’s removal from the Southern counties and seemingly far beyond direct concerns regarding Irish political independence, presents still a rather telling critique of the historical conditions that have clearly spawned it. Certainly befitting their own place and time, McCabe’s and Beckett’s characters display an indifference and ignorance to Irish history that rejects this very claim—on arriving in Dublin, Francie is unable to identify a statue of Daniel O’Connell, the famed “Liberator” of Irish Catholics. Moreover, upon hearing O’Connell’s name, Francie notes that he doesn’t know “anything about him except he was something to do with the English *and all that*” (40 my emphasis). McCabe’s poignant use of tone here epitomizes for us as readers of modern Irish literature the duality Irish colonial history represents. The reference to O’Connell and the generally glib reference to seven centuries of imperial rule clearly invoke the irrelevance of this

history to Francie's immediate concerns. And yet, *The Butcher Boy* asserts continually through Francie's struggles that imperial domination, revivalist overcoming, and the ensuing rhetoric of idealistic nationalism continue a tradition of subjugation beyond Francie's immediate comprehension.

The Irish Republic, developed out of a nationalist project necessarily and perhaps justifiably obsessed with ability and empowerment, subsists on and perpetuates the narratives of progressive development and social stability Francie repeatedly battles as he denies the importance of seemingly immaterial political concerns. Francie may not know the particulars of the fight for Irish liberation, but his regression to insanity and complete social annihilation replay the colonial struggle at the hands of the faux-imperial rhetoric launched by the more able-minded and socially secure members of his Irish community. Francie, like the Beckettian wanderers and storytellers that precede him, remains to the end ensconced in fictions of self-sufficiency and national ability despite a constant desire to throw off these constraining nets.⁹⁵ Beckett's characters repeatedly face this same marginalization despite willful ignorance of any social aims; the narrator of "The Expelled" is forced to the gutter by a policeman who "point[s] out to [him] that the sidewalk was for every one, as if it was quite obvious that [he] could not be assimilated to that category" (52). The category in question for Beckett's characters, and for Francie, is defined by the ideals of an Irish nation fully emerged into a postcolonial era of independent growth that ironically undermines and makes sterile any possibility of national development. That Patrick McCabe and Samuel Beckett both create characters ostensibly unconcerned with national issues but obviously consumed by national narratives only serves to highlight the ways in which the construction of the Irish nation—first by imperial rhetoric and then by nationalist fervor—continues beyond the age of Empire to inauthenticate, oppress, and marginalize certain

veins of Irish subjectivity. Beyond physical participation in this ideal Irish Republic and even from a place of unrecoverable isolation, these imprisoned characters persist in a need to fulfill the narratives that label and condemn them. Malone insightfully admits that he might be “more cheerful” if he would “lose [his] pencil more often” (222). As long as the pencil can write, however, Malone—like the Ireland that rejects him—is condemned to write more fictions that describe and prescribe his undoing.

Chapter 4

Yeats/Doyle/O'Neill: Sacrificial Body, Revisited

Almost a century after the Abbey debut of Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* takes its place among Irish literature of rebellion and sacrifice.⁹⁶ In their treatment of colonial oppression and national revolution, both these works stage a tension between individual romance and national devotion. In quite different ways, both seem to suggest that sacrifice for the cause of freedom transcends all individual desire and effectively distances the martyr from his martyrdom. Yeats's revivalist play enacts this separation through the implied sacrifice of Michael, a young man destined for marriage who willingly abandons his bride to follow the promise of infamy that accompanies his duty to die for Ireland. Yeats's 1902 treatment of the 1798 Rising effectively uses Michael's sacrifice to encourage a view of Irish character that privileges self-sacrifice for a greater national ideal that exists beyond current political oppression. Michael's sacrifice will—the audience believes—transform him as his devotion momentarily transforms the withered old woman into a beautiful young girl. O'Neill's sacrificing of Doyler Doyle as well asserts the consuming power of national sacrifice. Doyler's death necessarily privileges the fight for national liberation over Doyler's and Jim's desire for personal fulfillment and as well suggests that their union is unfit for national inclusion. In *At Swim, Two Boys*, desire for national belonging is consistently critiqued as is the assumption that a free Ireland will mean Irish freedom.⁹⁷ The novel indeed reflects, as Jodie Medd suggests in "Patterns of the Possible," "a danger of having one's body and intimacies co-opted by state power."⁹⁸ This danger of bodily exploitation and national intrusion is, we have seen, a central concern of Irish literature, reflected even in Yeats's fervently nationalist 1902 play. That these

two works—ninety-nine years apart—present similar themes and opposing viewpoints suggests an inextricable link between personal and national development as it exposes the debilitating effects of the actual Irish Revolution that followed Yeats’s largely abstract and idealistic play.

As it makes intimate Ireland’s highly mythologized 1916 Easter Rising, *At Swim, Two Boys* appropriately foregrounds the relationship between bodily sacrifice and national belonging. In doing so, this twenty-first-century novel indeed looks back to a tradition of blood sacrifice and colonial rebellion that creates national spirit through the admiration of martyrs to a cause. This admiration is exposed, though, as dangerous and historically irresponsible. As it attempts to maintain a spirit of communal worth and desire for freedom, rhetoric of self-sacrifice and martyrdom as well perpetuates futile deaths for the largely undefined cause of Irish freedom. O’Neill’s historical position allows a thorough exploration of Irish revivalism and rebellion from the vantage of an Irish Republic built on a centuries-long debate concerning the defining characteristics of appropriate Irishness. The bloodshed in *At Swim, Two Boys* suggests that national belonging has as well been bought at the price of individual freedoms. In a chilling exchange after the reported capture and imprisonment of Roger Casement, O’Neill’s Eva MacMurrough asserts, “It is too absurd to die of an influenza. Or of a Tuesday” (450). Doyler Doyle—identified throughout the novel with the spirit and beauty of Ireland herself—does just that, shot down by the British on the Tuesday of Easter Week. The absurdity of Doyler’s death for a country that spurns his homosexuality, poverty, and socialist ideals is coupled with an enthusiasm and exhilaration equally strange: “Here we go, our mad minute of glory, charging towards it. And it was true, the dead it was that walked... ‘We’ll all be dead by tonight,’ he called to Doyler. ‘Sure I know that,’ Doyler called back. ‘Yahoo!’” (540). While the reckless abandon of O’Neill’s heroes may recall the revivalist mania often associated with the Easter

rebels, the consequent suffering in *At Swim, Two Boys* rather critiques than endorses this idealization of national martyrdom. In the case of O'Neill's heroes, the giving of one's life is the final sacrifice in a series of self-denials that contain and threaten the spirit just as much as the oppressive authority against which the rebels fight. Along with Doyler's death in the Rising, Anthony MacMurrough's decision to join the imperial war effort because of his unrequited love for a boy suggests that for those who do not portray an appropriate national image, dying for one's country is the only way of becoming a part of it.

In both its presentation of pre-Rising Ireland and its ominous references to failed Irish rebellions, *At Swim, Two Boys* certainly never strays far from the reminder that many have died for the cause of Irish freedom. O'Neill's contribution comes largely, though, in his challenging of the traditional Irish rhetoric of spiritual superiority and chosenness upon which revivalist poets like Yeats relied. His implication is, of course, that the reward of blood sacrifice is nothing to be desired. In her critique "New Ireland/Hidden Ireland," Kim McMullen erroneously decries the novel's "unequivocal reiteration of romantic nationalism that...sweeps away several decades of careful postcolonial and feminist critique of nationalism itself."⁹⁹ In its use of Yeats's terms and revivalist impulses, *At Swim, Two Boys* in fact exposes the falsity of these narratives, the real devastation such blind devotion can cause, and the inability of Irish nationalism to offer real belonging or liberation even to those who give their lives for it. In the chaotic wake of the Rising, Mr. Mack fittingly tells a penniless paperboy, "see now...where your talk of Fenians and fighting and nation-once-again has got you" (498). O'Neill's revision of romantic nationalism comes clearly in his treatment of Irish reaction to the Rising and the reality that nationalist rhetoric alone cannot create a strong national community. And yet, O'Neill offers a still-more powerful critique of naïve nationalist sentiment in his tragicomic portrayal of Irish disability and

deformity that accompanies its colonial status and national aspirations. Unlike Yeats's Michael who simply "rushes out, following the OLD WOMAN'S voice" and disappears into a martyr's glory, Doyler dies bleeding in Jim's arms, his wounds reflecting the very real violence of the Easter Rising and the wars that would follow. In a stunning pairing of images, O'Neill effectively presents the horrors of colonial oppression and retroactively critiques an Irish nation that continues the kind of marginalization that prevents actual progression. O'Neill displays this double effacement of Irish identity in his juxtaposition of the imperial recruitment poster and the butcher's window. In one, Doyler sees "a strapping Irish soldier...save now his legs [are] missing," inquiring, "When are the other boys coming?" (58). In the other, Jim eyes a displayed cow's head—"the butcher had prised its tongue out and curled it over the corner of its mouth, the way it would be licking its lips in anticipation of its own taste" (59). In their clear display of Irish self-sacrifice—at times forced, at times willing—these images encapsulate Irish disability created by imperial misrule and maintained by national containment. In this focus on the body as a site of imperial and national violence, O'Neill's contemporary Irish literature consistently reminds his readers of the intimate consequences of political struggle and critiques an Irish nation of the Yeatsian sort that professes a hatred of tyranny as it feeds the authorities that bind it.

Henry Smart, eponymous hero of Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry*—a fictionalized account of growing rebellion in revivalist Ireland and a mock history of Free State development—appears on the literary scene a few years after O'Neill's martyrs to further critique and expose the nationalist sentiments *At Swim, Two Boys* questions but in some ways can't escape.¹⁰⁰ Roddy Doyle's revolutionary, who most notably refuses to become a martyr to any cause, suggests that the contemporary Irish literature indeed advocates a rebirth of Irish

character and an undoing of old Irish rhetoric. The absolute paragon of Irish poverty, disadvantage, and disability, Henry Smart fights the British, the Irish, and any authority who dares infringe on his personal freedoms. As such, he represents for Irish freedom a hero who takes as his cause the “real” Irish people whose grimy reality defies grandiose images of blood sacrifice for the glory of a new Irish nation.

“Ireland,” says Henry Smart, “was something in songs that drunken old men wept about as they held on to the railings at three in the morning and we homed in to rob them” (79). Roddy Doyle’s awkwardly humorous critique of living conditions in pre-rebellion Ireland consistently reminds us that though, as Yeats’s *Cathleen* says, “many a man has died for love of me,” such blood sacrifice becomes more and more an empty homage to a nation ignorant of its people’s plight and uncaring of their contributions (8). As O’Neill’s depressing conclusion suggests, while the “terrible beauty” of the Easter Rising may eventually usher in Irish political independence, it does so only at the cost of civil war and the breakdown of Irish freedoms. Henry Smart’s journey takes up where Michael Gillane’s and Doyler Doyle’s ends—he witnesses the regression of nationalist ambition and the containment of individual freedom that comes in the wake of nationalist fervor. Even in its form, then, Roddy Doyle’s rewriting of Irish revolution—like O’Neill’s expansive retelling of Yeats’s classic national drama—re-examines the rhetoric of blood sacrifice by showing the consequent failure of nationalist ideals and by ultimately refusing the sacrifice of personal freedom to the changing tides of political struggle. Henry leaves Ireland for Liverpool (and, eventually, America) upon realizing the futility of his efforts for change. A century after Yeats’s *Cathleen* declares that an Irishman “must give me himself...must give me all” (8), Henry turns his back on a promise of freedom that comes with

too large a cost and too little reward: Ireland, he says, “needed blood to survive and it wasn’t getting mine” (381).

A Star Called Ireland: W.B. Yeats, Roddy Doyle, and the Disabling of Irish Heroes

In an 1899 letter describing their desire for an Irish National Theatre, Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats proclaim that they “hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory.” We will, they go on, “show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation.”¹⁰¹ In his early poetry and revivalist drama, Yeats clearly takes up the cause of an ancient Irish idealism and sets to work on building and representing an Irish people deemed superior to their British oppressors through an imaginative and poetic nature that transcends the bounds of Irish Catholicism in favor of an ethnically-determined spiritual chosenness that relates to Irish soil itself. The spiritual soul of the Irish people, he asserts, is privileged not through religious practice, but rather by an innate poetic and imaginative sensibility possessed only by the authentic Irish. As he fashions this Irish character, Yeats participates in the most basic of nation-building activities, the creation of an ideal Irish image to which the people can aspire and for which the people will sacrifice themselves. Despite its revivalist themes, though, Yeats’s approach to the rebuilding and re-authenticating of the Irish people clashed immensely with other cultural Revivalists of the Gaelic League who, in addition to the reviving of Irish literature, dress, and athletics, located the core of Irishness in the revival of the Gaelic language. Like Yeats, however, these Revivalists agreed that the question of Irishness in the late-nineteenth

century was becoming muddled, being abused, and being investigated along lines that were perhaps too eager to define the Irish as simply not English.

Diverging political aims and a tradition of repulsion and attraction to English cultural practices brought the Irish of Yeats's time to a position of stagnation, isolation, and paralysis. In "The Gaelic Revival," D.P. Moran rightly notes that the question for the Irish is not "Who are the Celts?" but rather "Who are *we*?"¹⁰² Moran suggests that Anglo-Irish literature presents "one set of characters made to the order of English prejudice, and another set to that of Irish prejudice" (79). Moran's observation highlights a circularity that haunts the question of Irish ethnicity and its definition. Moran's battle against the English and propounding of the building of an Irish "civilization" attempts to at least in some way resolve this tension. His call for de-anglicization exhorts the Irish people to fall back upon their own "language and traditions," from which will follow Ireland's "old pride, self-respect, and initiative."¹⁰³ For Moran, the ability to stop English oppression comes only through the declaration of a truly Irish nation which cannot be born without a belief in the strength and superiority of an Irish civilization. The civilization of which Moran speaks is a community that believes itself to be a "sacred communion" which possesses a spiritual independence as much as the desire for political freedom. As Yeats does, Moran describes Ireland as "one of the oldest and independent civilizations" and decries its lack of achievement. His juxtaposition of "oldest" and "independent" presents a kind of ethnic election that Yeats clearly takes up in his declaration of Irish chosenness.

Yeats's consistent sidestepping of the language question despite nationalist aspirations reveals an intense focus on an abstract spirit of the Irish people rather than the common revivalist emphasis on more tangible Irish customs. In a letter to *United Ireland*, Yeats insists that it is the Gaelic stories and legends that should be the foundation of Irish nationality. "Let us not base

upon [the language] our hopes of nationhood,” he says. Rather, it is the “beauty” and “majesty” of the Cuchulain stories and the Gaelic myths that are “immortal” and thus should support the Irish claims of a transcendent spirituality.¹⁰⁴ Yeats’s emphasis on “beauty” and “majesty” is prevalent throughout his early criticism of the Revival and his defense of his own definition of Irish character against, most notably, Matthew Arnold’s charges of a weak and effeminate Celtic sensibility. Rewriting the terms of Arnold’s *The Study of Celtic Literature*, Yeats transforms every criticism of Irish hysteria and melancholy into a celebration of the “primitive” roots of Irish culture and a distinctively Irish spiritual connection to nature and to ancient ways. It is the Irish, he says, who possess “imaginative passions” and “natural magic” which constitute the “ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature” (176). As we will see, this emphasis on other-worldly passions and a transcendent inner life leads Yeats toward a dangerous collusion of ancient Gaelic myth and modern political concerns. The real Irish must then profess their love of nation by becoming martyrs to the cause of freedom. Just who the “real” Irish are is a lot more difficult for Yeats to say and a question grappled with (and put to political ends) in his time by the English and the Irish.

Twenty-first-century writings from the long-independent Republic of Ireland attest that the core of true Irishness is hotly debated a century later. O’Neill’s and Doyle’s novels contribute most significantly to this question by representing as authentically Irish those sects of the budding Irish nation that official nationalism most strongly rejects. Roddy Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry* indeed directly mocks Yeats’s revivalist program with the introduction of a “real” Irish slum dweller amidst talk of abstract Irish chosenness and transcendent spirituality.¹⁰⁵ Born in 1901—two years after Lady Gregory’s proclamation of the Irish people’s “ancient idealism”—Henry Smart is the first “healthy, good-sized baby” the women on his street have

ever seen. The mere fact that he is undoubtedly going to survive is a miracle that makes him, from the moment of birth, a legend in his own right. The rumors of his prowess reach all the way, Henry says, to Lady Gregory—there was a story, he says, “about Lady Gregory’s head gardener knocking on the door wanting to buy whatever fell into my nappy to spread around Lady Gregory’s rose-bushes; there’d be a man with a carriage and bucket to carry my shite west to Coole every evening” (28). As it mocks the revivalist notion of authentic bodily and racial Irishness, the image of Henry’s shit in the gardens of Coole as well sets up Roddy Doyle’s critique of an Irish rebellion carried out by the Irish poor and an Irish nationalism that leaves their needs unfulfilled. In this way, as *A Star Called Henry* writes Henry Smart into the 1916 General Post Office of Michael Collins, it also writes reality into the idealism of Yeats’s Ireland. Set against the gritty misery of Roddy Doyle’s Dublin slums, Yeats’s revivalist works clearly privilege mythical notions of Irish nobility at the cost of actual Irish circumstance. This collision is nowhere more clear than in his most nationalist drama *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Here, Yeats examines true Irishness through a critique of ambitious Irish peasants more attune to economic concerns than spiritual ones. His interrogation of the Gillane family suggests that Irish freedom will come only through complete self-sacrifice and the throwing off of all material concerns. Blood sacrifice in service to the nation is here unquestioningly offered to the Irish people as that which will restore their nobility and grant their independence.

Yeats’s heroic portrayal of Michael Gillane and the equally unheroic preoccupations of his parents suggest in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* that a true Irishman chooses love of country over material comfort, devotion to Ireland before all other concerns. The opening of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is in fact consumed by a discussion of monetary gain and, perhaps more importantly, social (by way of economic) progress. Peter and Bridget Gillane await with excitement the

marriage of their son in order to obtain the dowry given by Delia Cahel's family. The Gillanes are coming into money, and as such their vision is shown throughout the play to be clouded and insufficiently patriotic. As Patrick eagerly discusses the upheaval outside, Bridget's attention is on "Michael's wedding clothes," material possessions that Peter proclaims are "grand clothes indeed." Bridget's comments that Peter "hadn't clothes like that" when they were married, nor more of a coat to wear than "any other day," suggests both upward mobility and that their marriage wasn't quite as ceremonious or focused on outward appearance. The spiritual and sacramental union of marriage, Yeats suggests, is being distorted and transcended by the dowry system and material concerns. Peter's admission that they "never thought a son of [their] own would be wearing a suit of that sort" or "have so good a place" to bring his wife further emphasizes their pride in their new social and economic situation. The talk of "Delia's fortune" and Peter's hope that he will get his hands on it continues amidst repeated references by Patrick to the commotion outside and his worry that "war or trouble" is coming. Peter is especially obsessed by the "fortune," fondling it, counting it, and hiding it when the "stranger," Cathleen, arrives at the house. Never does the intended bridegroom, Michael, speak of money, and he is thus set apart from the characterization of the Irish peasant as seeking only wealth and possessed by a need for material gain. Michael arrives late because he has been visiting the priest, and his elation at the priest's approval is ignored by his father who asks only about the dowry. Echoing Yeats's emphasis on the primacy of the spirit, Michael asserts that "the fortune only lasts for a while, but the woman," the marriage, "will be there always" (5). His comment looks forward to the arrival of Cathleen who is a woman perpetually present as the spirit of Ireland. In following her, Michael will find a woman who is, and has always been, "there." As Peter and Bridget remain focused on the bag of money, they are unable to recognize Cathleen's call to a superior

vocation of sorts. In fact, Peter fears her as a “stranger” in the house, the very same word Cathleen uses to describe the invaders who have taken her land away. Though Peter and Bridget eventually offer Cathleen part of their wealth, it is out of superstition not charity—“Give her the shilling...or our luck will go from us” (8). In the disparate reactions of Michael and his parents, Yeats begins his construction of true Irish spirituality. Building on the Christian declaration that “No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24), Yeats champions Michael as the peasant encapsulation of Irish nobility and declares that you cannot serve Ireland and wealth either. Rather, one must abandon class concerns and material gain in order to find freedom and immortality. Those who fight for Cathleen will be immortal, “they shall be remembered for ever” (10).

This most haunting call to historical immortality supports what contemporary Irish authors expose as useless martyrdom to an image of Irishness that neither guarantees political independence nor truly represents what a free Irish nation would look like. Blood sacrifice is rather called upon to prove one’s allegiance to an imagined community that, we ultimately see, cannot make room for all strains of Irish character and belief. Yeats’s play in fact relies on the creation and (en)abling of Irish heroes whose image must later be disabled by the breakdown of the Irish national image they espoused. On a literal and historical level, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* unambiguously advocates blood sacrifice in service to Ireland, referring specifically to the 1798 rising. As Chadwick notes, “the play appeals not to negotiation or even covert subversion as means of attaining definite political goals, but rather to violent rebellion in the service of a transcendent spiritual ideal of nationality.”¹⁰⁶ Chadwick’s juxtaposition of spirituality and nationality reflects Yeats’s desire to treat political action as almost in service to Irish identification and a morality that transcends political gain. Michael’s decision to go with

Cathleen, and to fight in the Rising, displays this quite well—it is important that he goes, not that the Irish are successful in their fight. Cathleen’s admission that “many a man has died for love of me” (8) tells Michael and reminds us that it is a noble though often a failed fight. Cathleen tells Michael that even if “they are put down to-day,” those who fight for her “will get the upper hand to-morrow” (9). This suggests, of course, that those who die for Ireland will receive future glory though they may not gain the freedom from tyranny that Ireland so needs.

Such future glory comes through the legendary status martyrdom affords and also suggests, once again, the privileging of such abstract rewards above material success. Peter’s and Bridget’s attempts to stop Michael and their inability to understand Cathleen’s spirituality thus create a tension in the play. Michael’s parents don’t want him to go; they will lose their money if he doesn’t marry Delia. The play clearly shuns this kind of economic anxiety in favor of the more passionate appeal to a national revolution. As he goes off to fight, Michael also recalls the image of Michael the Archangel who, in Revelation, fights against the dragon and defeats the demons so that “there [is] no longer any place for them in heaven” (12:7). As the Archangel expels the demons from hell, so too does Michael at least symbolically take up the role of defender of the “sacred” land of Ireland. He follows Cathleen to comfort her and to expel the English demons from the spiritual sanctuary of Ireland. As Michael becomes entranced by Cathleen, forgetting what wedding and what clothes his parents refer to, he enters into a sacred union with Cathleen that is privileged over the marriage he is about to enter when the play begins. His sacramental marriage to Delia has been compromised by the dowry system; his ultimate union with Cathleen is pure as is she and the Gaelic past she represents. Just before Michael leaves, Delia asks why he looks at her “like a stranger” (11). Delia and Cathleen have effectively changed roles; Delia is the stranger, Cathleen the bride. In conflating the roles of

nationalist hero and spiritual martyr, Yeats transforms Michael into a spiritual model whose passionate martyrdom reflects true Irish spirituality and shows love of Cathleen, of Ireland, as its greatest manifestation.

In his 1906 rewrite of his play *On Baile's Strand*, Yeats continues to reflect on the nature of essential Irishness as he expounds the virtues of physical prowess and ancient passion that, he suggests, must once again characterize the Irish people.¹⁰⁷ While *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* draws its inspiration from the failed yet heroic uprising of 1798, *On Baile's Strand* rather recalls another strand of Irish history, a past rich with Gaelic myth and heroic storytelling upon which Yeats hopes to build a new Irish nation. In using these Gaelic stories, Yeats seemingly bridges gaps in the cultural make-up of his present day Ireland while eliding questions of religious and national belonging that haunt Doyle's and O'Neill's post-independence texts. Despite some criticism of the willful martyrdom Yeats espouses in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, *On Baile's Strand* supports a call to revolution based on the need for the protection and empowerment of the Irish people and the land that sustains them. Referencing the Red Branch Cycle of Gaelic poetry and mythology, *On Baile's Strand* dramatizes rebellion, oppression, and heroism through Cuchulain and Conchubar, Kings of Ireland who recall a Gaelic society able to defend and protect itself from would-be invaders. Yeats's use of Gaelic heroes as well contributes to the discussion of appropriate Irishness and how such true nationalism will be worn. Yeats's favor for Cuchulain, Ireland's most revered and iconic figure, ties the triumphant Irishness of old to physical and mental ability by the use of masculine bravado and personal authority. In the end, though, *On Baile's Strand* is yet another portrayal of a failed Irish fight. Cuchulain's failure, as dramatized in the play, contributes to notions of Irish exceptionalism that rely on limiting definitions of

proper masculinity and suggest that centuries of bondage have left the Irish incapable of communal strength or successful revolution.¹⁰⁸

While *On Baile's Strand* resurrects myths of heroic battles and Gaelic kingships, it also speaks to the persistent issues of political oppression, material desire, and middle-class ineptitude Yeats recognized in his contemporary Irishmen. When we read *On Baile's Strand* as a nationalist text, we see in its subtext critiques of Irishness that mirror Yeats's concerns in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as well as his own fears about the Irish people's ability to recognize what he considers their spiritual exceptionality. As he later presents through Hanrahan in stories of poetic vision cut short by peasant squabbles,¹⁰⁹ in *On Baile's Strand* Yeats opposes the majesty of Cuchulain's natural bravery and ability to the cowardice and disability of the blind man and the fool. As well, he shows Cuchulain's potential for civility and dominance truncated by Conchubar, a high king who thus represents authoritative oppression and the limitations of an Irish nationalism founded on competing notions of freedom and competing demands for power and acclaim. Through Conchubar's arrogant malice, the blind man's cowardice, and the fool's obsession with material comfort, Yeats critiques an Irish society unable to recognize the true heroism that is reflective of real Irishness and can be traced back to Cuchulain's mastery of all whom he encounters. That Cuchulain's ultimate misery results from the killing of his own son—and that this death comes largely from Conchubar's duplicity—reiterates the belief that the Irish people are impeding their own progression and clinging to concerns that demean rather than uplift them.

In a telling opposition that allies ideal Irishness with physical strength and dominating power, Yeats presents Cuchulain through the words of a fool whose voice the play increasingly identifies with materialism, ignorance, and cowardice. The fool's prophecy about Cuchulain's

invincibility immediately foreshadows tragedy to come—no one can kill Cuchulain, says the fool, for he has “killed kings, / Kings and sons of kings, / Dragons out of the water, / And witches out of the air.” The fool’s references throughout the play to Cuchulain’s dominance over “Witches that steal the milk, / Fomor that steal the children, / [and] Hags that have heads like hares” paints for the audience a mythical Gaelic world of fantastic creatures and magical happenings over which Cuchulain is king, protector, and ultimate authority (14). The finality with which the fool praises Cuchulain as well suggests, though, that the play will chart not his continued success but a fall from grace. Indeed, the play dramatizes this very movement—the devolution of Cuchulain from greatness to madness. We see through the fool’s songs—known throughout the land and thus themselves evidence of Cuchulain’s heroic reputation—that Cuchulain’s power is defined always by his physical strength and success in battle. In both regards, Cuchulain reflects an Irishness that demands the respect, honor, and authority that seems unattainable for the colonized Irishman of Yeats’s time. That Cuchulain values bravery and bravado beyond even Irish boundaries is confirmed when the young man appears on the scene; he receives Cuchulain’s immediate blessing because he has “a hot heart and a cold eye.” Cuchulain is drawn to the young man—whom he expected to fight—because he “has got [Aoife’s] fierceness,” that which Cuchulain most admires in a companion and rival (24). Cuchulain’s assertion that he “would leave / My house and name to none that would not face / Even myself in battle” further underscores Ireland’s need for heroic warriors and the importance of preserving a view of Irishness that resists weakness and champions the fighting spirit Cuchulain represents.

As it reflects the beauty of Gaelic storytelling and reinvents a cultural history of the warring Irishman, *On Baile’s Strand* as well displays warring definitions of stable Irishness and

the resultant failure of submitting to authority. While Conchubar praises Cuchulain's ability to defend Irish shores and defeat opponents in battle, Cuchulain defines his own spirit and strength by his reckless abandon and fierce desire for life. The arrival of the young man from Scotland is afforded, so says Conchubar, by Cuchulain's failure to vigilantly monitor the shores—the young man comes to land while Cuchulain is “somewhere out of sight and hearing, / Hunting or dancing with [his] wild companions.” In the face of Conchubar's fears, Cuchulain insists he will “dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love, / Wherever and whenever [he has] a mind to” (17). In fact, his admiration of Aoife—the woman who, we know, is the young man's mother—stems from her refusal to submit and obey as Irish women do. Along with fierceness of body and spirit, Aoife displays an independent will unseen in the Irish provinces. Conchubar, Cuchulain claims, would “have no woman near that would not say, ‘Ah! how wise!’ ... And keep that humming through the day and night” (19). The play's tension indeed revolves around the questions of oath-taking and submission. As James Flannery notes, the “philosophical issues at stake” in *On Baile's Strand* are those that oppose “Conchubar's desire for a rational social order” and “Cuchulain's will to retain his personal sense of freedom.”¹¹⁰ As part of Yeats's nationalist repertoire, *On Baile's Strand* then also critiques the submission to authority that characterizes Irish colonial status. That Cuchulain's madness springs from his submission to Conchubar's will clearly suggests that heroic Irishness need not submit to taming and domestication.

Like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan's* critique of materialism and middle-class aspiration, *On Baile's Strand* fuses the world of Gaelic mythology with modern concerns about domestic comfort and security. From the play's beginning, Cuchulain fears the day when he “must be obedient in all things; / Give up [his] will to [Conchubar's]; go where [Conchubar] pleases” (17). Cuchulain, we see, is the only hold-out. The other kings have easily submitted because they

have “wives and children now, / And for that reason cannot follow one / That lives like a bird’s flight from tree to tree” (21). In taking the oath, Cuchulain admits he must abandon “Whatever life could make the pulse run quickly” (22) and instead “put water in [his] blood” (21). Like the other kings, he has thus been tamed and accepted a domestic stability not in keeping with his spirit of adventure and independence. Such submission immediately disempowers him, a loss of strength the play rhetorically places amidst growing concerns about hunger and material well-being. The fool and the blind man—who, quite traditionally, is the only one who ‘sees’ the tragedy unfolding—epitomize the base material concerns to which Cuchulain’s reckless abandon is opposed. As Cuchulain’s undoing unfolds, the fool obsessively searches for food to satisfy his “pinched and rusty” stomach (15). He is often confused by the blind man’s tale of Aoife’s son because he is focusing rather on “the fowl,” the “cooking-pot” and the “crubeen.” As Cuchulain receives the news of the young man’s true lineage, the fool still regales him with talk of food and petty quarrels. In their ignorance and simplicity, the fool and the blind man—consistently afraid of Cuchulain and eager to blame each other should any wrath arise—reflect a cowardly and unknowing populace who, unlike the heroes they should emulate, care only for material goods and the fulfillment of bodily hunger rather than of spiritual yearning. As Cuchulain fights the waves—becoming a pitiful warrior who battles an insurmountable opponent—the fool and the blind man profit by stealing whatever food they can find. In doing so, they prefigure the Irish people robbing on the streets of Dublin as the Easter rebels sacrifice themselves in the GPO. As the fool and the blind man go out, salivating and exclaiming, they become the play’s true villains, affirming Yeats’s stage instructions that both men are “ragged, and their features made grotesque” (12). As they represent Cuchulain’s fears of being disempowered and enslaved, the

fool and the blind man exhibit Yeats's critique of a modern Irish obsession with financial and material security at the expense of spiritual deterioration.

On Baile's Strand's most complex contribution to Yeats's revivalist aesthetic of martyrdom and honor comes through its critique of Irish complacency and submission to the rhetoric of disability and weakness that British imperialism expounds. In this acceptance, Yeats implies, the Irish indeed stunt their own potential and refuse themselves the ability to develop into a national people that is culturally rich and politically self-sustaining. The play clearly displays this critique through its deliberation on child-bearing, heirs, and kingly succession. The blind man in fact initially predicts that Conchubar will force the oath upon Cuchulain by saying, "Do as I tell you....what sons have you to pay your debts and to put a stone over you when you die?" (13). Conchubar's declaration that he will "leave / A strong and settled country to [his] children" reflects the play's anxiety about Cuchulain's lack of heirs and the fear of losing Ireland's lands to "a stranger's keeping," (18) the term recalling of course the "strangers in the house" that have sent Cathleen Ni Houlihan wandering (*Cathleen* 7). While Conchubar can for a time demean Cuchulain with talk of wildness and instability, the appearance of the young man marks a turning point in the play because it engenders in Cuchulain a desire for a kind of stability he has previously shunned. His admiration for the young man's bravery and fierceness qualifies this acquiescence and supports Cuchulain's nobility rather than compromising it. In the play's most critical statement, Cuchulain says to the young man, "If I'd a son like you. He would avenge me...But I'd need no avenger. You and I / Would scatter [Ireland's enemies] like water from a dish" (26-27). Cuchulain's ability to protect Ireland and dominate his enemies is now tied to the young man who is, we find out, his son. In slaying the young man in battle, Cuchulain thus enacts his own regression into madness and guarantees an Ireland unable to protect itself

from invasion. Significantly, we see that Cuchulain's killing of his own son—and thus the extermination of the blood line that would support and sustain him—results from the submission of his will to Conchubar's. Fearing that the young man and Cuchulain may prove a more powerful force than he, Conchubar forbids the friendship. "Cuchulain," Conchubar says, "is my man" (27). By convincing Cuchulain that the young man's presence bodes of witchcraft and evil spirits, Conchubar sets in motion the young man's death and Cuchulain's descent to madness. In the end, as Cuchulain strikes at the waves, he reflects an Ireland defeated by imperial authority and competing nationalisms as its heroic desires are mastered by the anger and humiliation these forces create. In this invocation of tragic self-defeat and hallucinatory rebellion, *On Baile's Strand* prefigures the tension with which Yeats addresses actual rebellion in his most famous meditation on the honor of martyrdom: "Easter, 1916."¹¹

Irish literary representation of the Easter Rising, like the Rising itself, reveals the complexities of an Irish nationalism built upon the very myths of self-sacrifice the Easter rebels came to embody. Alternately realist and romantic, critical and admiring, Yeats's poem presents the Easter rebels as the surprising actualization of the Gaelic myths his cultural nationalism so revered. As it elevates the martyrs to the level of nationalist heroes, though, the poem does so with reservations about the prospect of a successful Irish nation born of such terrible loss. Criticism of Yeats's poem as well reflects this tension and suggests that Yeats's view of the Rising is influenced equally by his desire to reinvent Irish heroism and his discomfort in the face of the actual blood sacrifice whose mythical counterpart can inspire a nation without traumatizing it. As Lloyd notes, "'Easter, 1916' concerns the foundation of a nation by the transformation of individuals into symbols. What disturbs Yeats here, though, is that this transformation takes place not through the intermediary of poetry but in consequence of violence

itself” (*Anomalous States* 69). The conflicts of Easter 1916, the event and subsequent poem, revolve consistently around this struggle between actuality and representation.

“Easter, 1916” as well reflects Yeats’s difficulty in aligning Irishness with the elitism of Gaelic heroes—a cultural superiority he as well sees in the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy—while recognizing the middle-class reality of the Rising and the unheroic reaction of middle-class Dublin to this supposedly heroic rebellion. As Deane says in *Celtic Revivals*, Yeats indeed “denies...the bourgeois character of the Irish rebellion in order to preserve it as an aristocratic emblem caught in the tide of bourgeois life. [Yeats takes] the racial element in Irish nationalism, separate[s] it from the class element, and ma[kes] the former supreme” (46). Just as he critiques the Gillanes in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and the fool in *On Baile’s Strand* to emphasize true Irish exceptionality, Yeats highlights in “Easter, 1916” the elite transformation of common men to a heroic status befitting the Gaelic essence from which they spring. In doing so, Yeats aligns the Easter rebels with Cuchulain and creates for them as entrenched a place in Irish myth. Such myths function, as Deane notes, as “instrument[s] for the present” that provide continuity for a history otherwise “gapped, discontinuous, unmanageably complex” (36). This aligning of Gaelic myth and present political impulse advocates blood sacrifice to the nation as it addresses the horrific need for such an impetus for change. Here, the body of the nation can begin to grow only “watered,” as Yeats says in “The Rose Tree,” with the people’s “own red blood” (183).

In his honoring of the Easter rebels, Yeats in fact enables and supports their mythic status as much as Doyle’s twenty-first-century portrayal of the Rising will disable them. Though Yeats certainly humanizes the martyrs and questions the impact their actions will have, he does so in a way that romanticizes their lives as it does their deaths. In describing the martyrs, Yeats remarks on Constance Von Markiewicz’s “sweet” voice, “young and beautiful” appearance and “good-

will.” The mythologized image of Patrick Pearse on a “wingéd horse” and Thomas MacDonagh’s “daring and sweet” nature support a view of the martyrs that deftly eulogizes and elevates them as it references their humanity. Indeed, Yeats presents a dramatic rendering of the Easter Rising that may thus contribute as much to Ireland’s resurrection. As Kenner remarks, for Yeats, the “agonies of Easter Week were birth-pangs.” Through “Easter, 1916,” Yeats, Kenner says, “takes charge of what seems failure and transfigures it by his mention” (181). This transfiguration aligns with Yeats’s national project and characteristically ignores the middle-class reaction that undermines Irish character—“the populace,” Kenner reminds us, “were on the whole resentful of a gang who’d shut the city down all week and wrecked it to the extent of £2.5 million” (178). Yeats’s selective use of “vivid” details in the poem serves his project well but, we must also note, complicates his previous use of sacrificial martyrdom and begins to recognize the physical bodies put at risk for the sake of national development. The tension inherent between these two—one material and one rhetorical—never leaves Yeats’s poem but is rather intensified in each consideration he puts forth.

These opposing terms—the material body and the rhetorical “body” of the nation—resurface throughout the poem in equally disturbing dichotomies as Yeats moves between lightness and despair, the real and the abstract, the material and the metaphorical. His initial emphasis on the “vivid faces” of the martyrs before the rebellion immediately recalls what Yeats describes as a simpler time before the human faces become inextricably linked with the Rising and inexorably shaded in death. His references to a “mocking tale,” a “gibe” and “motley” clothing as well connote a lightheartedness that will soon fade. Amidst these realities, even Yeats does not realize the horrors that will come when blood sacrifice itself becomes reality rather than rhetoric. As Yeats’s personal remembrances of the martyrs fuse with the warmth and

contentment of “the fire at the club,” we see the national poet of martyrdom and revolution detached from the words on the page and invested in a reality that does not align with wave-fighting heroes. This innocent exposition to the poem underscores Yeats’s later contention that, as Lloyd comments, “the transformation of lout or clown into martyr that brings about the foundation of the nation...produce[s] not reconciliation but a troubled tension” (71).

Truly, Yeats’s forced honoring of John MacBride, his personal rival, as part of this “casual comedy” underscores his disbelief rather than expectant admiration in the face of the rebels’ deeds. While Kenner highlights this element of comedy in his critiques of the Irish literary response to the Rising—“if,” he says, “you can suppress thought of the pain...much of what’s left is Keystone comedy” (177)—Yeats’s use of “casual” demands equal attention. In the Easter Rising, the rebels evince with surprising ease the transformation of Yeats’s mythologies into horrific realities. Casually—and thus most dangerously—the abstract has become real, the metaphorical stone has become the stone-cold bodies of Irish patriots. Yeats addresses this easy slippage in the poem’s final stanza: “No, no, not night but death,” he says. The metaphorical “night” of the martyr’s demise can no longer express the real experience of the rebel executions. Yeats’s reflections in “Sixteen Dead Men” even more strongly support the breakdown of this metaphor—the reality that giving “all” in the *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* sense means giving life for a nation as yet unformed and somewhat unmoved by blood sacrifice. As “Easter, 1916” juxtaposes the metaphorical and the real, the abstract and the vivid, the vague murmuring of the living to the martyrs’ utter change, “Sixteen Dead Men” presents in each stanza a breakdown of logic and reasoning in the face of bodily sacrifice. Here, Yeats’s meditation on the dead—and thus irrevocably disabled—body is arresting after the questioning ambiguity with which he ends “Easter, 1916.” Though it may not have been “needless death” as “Easter, 1916” speculates, the

rebels' executions were indeed actual deaths that can never completely dissolve Cuchulain-style into symbol and myth.¹¹² The “deaf and dumb” “dead men” with “bony thumb” lying “bone to bone” finally supersede Yeats's mythologizing of blood sacrifice. Images of their decomposition take precedence here over the “talk[ing]” and “argu[ing]” “give and take” that characterizes abstract political rhetoric. Yeats's reference to Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone—a nod that again reads reality and history into the potentially abstract discussion of Irish sacrifice—does, however, finish “Sixteen Dead Men” with a sentimental reminder of blood already spilt for freedom. Like the eulogizing personal descriptions Yeats offers in “Easter, 1916,” this closing allusion enables the creation of Irish heroes and stirs Irish passions to avenge their deaths through a continued national fight.

Yeats's elegiac yet impassioned tones reflect his evolution from playwright of idealistic Irish nationalism to disturbed national poet. While the call to honor and patriotism is clearly present in Yeats's Easter poems, the legacy the poems offer is one always complicated by the sense of shock and loss that Yeats experiences as part of this historical moment. Nowhere is this tension more apparent—and more academically analyzed—than in Yeats's image of “a stone / To trouble the living stream.” In his reading, Lloyd suggests the stone as symbolic of “the singular moment in which a nation is founded,” that which is fixed in time unlike the “living stream” that represents a “future history of the citizens [this moment] brings into being” (71). Lloyd continues, noting that the stone's “finality as gravestone” for the national martyrs “would appear to be at odds with the opening of a future history which its function as foundation-stone implies” (71). This tension aligns with Yeats's use of binary images throughout the poem and further highlights Ireland's position as a traumatized national body fed with blood-rich soil. Kiberd supports this reading of the poem's ambiguity in suggesting that Yeats's precise

rendering of pastoral life against the unchanging stone reflects his fear “that an irretrievable error has been committed.” Indeed, a sense of fear and doubt invades the poem, repeatedly through the juxtaposition of “terrible” and “beauty” as well as in the stone’s immediate aura of unmoving coldness. Read, by Kiberd, as “emblematic of extreme idealism” (113) and, by Kenner, as “like stony fanaticism in troubling the flow of the natural” (181), the stone reaffirms Yeats’s critique of a nationalist fervor insufficiently prepared to consider worldly consequence. Kiberd adds, though, the most important caveat to this common reading—“by refusing to change,” Kiberd notes, “the rebels have, in fact, changed everything.... Without that stone,” as Kiberd says, “no ripples could vibrate at all” (214). However casual, ill-conceived, and untimely the moment of rebellion, the rebels, in their martyrdom, mobilize a national fight increasingly identified with their heroic sacrifice. A century later, Doyle and O’Neill ironically return to the rhetoric of Yeatsian nationalism and interrogate the formation of these national heroes. In doing so, they present Irish outsiders themselves troubling to the main streams of Irish nationalism and re-examine the romantic elevation of the Easter rebels in the weeks and months following the Rising. Focusing on the disabled and rejected limbs of the national body, Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry* becomes in our time a stone that troubles the easy clichés of accepted Irish national mythology.

In *A Star Called Henry*, Roddy Doyle presents the negative imprint of romanticized Ireland to question the definition of Irishness and the value of a national fight waged at the expense of Ireland’s poor and disabled masses. As well, the novel reflects on the accepted remembrances of the Easter Rising so eloquently memorialized in “Easter, 1916.” In exposing traditional idealizations of the Rising, Doyle privileges the marginalized Irish whose fight has not been told. The preponderance of physical disability in Doyle’s text aligns marginalized

Irishness with physical discomfort and as well suggests that mainstream Irish nationalism hides a disturbing amount of actual dysfunction, disease, and despair. Henry Smart's Ireland is not the land of "imaginative passions" and "natural magic" that Yeats envisioned in his bid for a cultural revolution. In Henry's "small corner of the Empire," disease and despair characterize Irish life. Henry's mother, Melody Nash, already an "old woman" at age twenty-one, is "a child of the Dublin slums, no proper child at all....Bad food, bad drink, bad air. Bad bones, bad eyes, bad skin; thin, stooped, mangled" (8). Dublin's physically debilitating environment is matched by the oppressive power structures Melody Nash serves—she works "all day, six days a week, sweating, going blind for God and Mitchell" in Mitchell's rosary bead factory. She exists with "hands bleeding, [and] eyes itching....squinting, counting, shredding her hands, in a black hole making beads" (5). Thus before Henry's birth, a history of religious and economic pressure predetermines the hardship he will face. Henry and his brother Victor represent the "real" Ireland—their "dirt merge[s] with the streets. [They are] made of Dublin muck" and rise from the city's dregs to challenge and defeat those who seek to contain them. Poverty and disease define the young boys as they define Dublin:

In the dead of night, when we walked alone through the streets...that was what we heard—the city coughing. That was all we heard at four in the morning...Dead, dead silence except for the thousands coughing, a steady, terrible beat coming from the rooms above us and the basement areas, children and adults being choked to death by poverty. They were too late; we could hear the pain the noise, we could feel life desperately clinging. It was how night-time was measured in the slums, in blood coughs and death rattles. And Victor had been coughing along with them....His cough had been different. Just a cough. It was what you did when you breathed Dublin air. When you slept on the ground. When you didn't have shoes. (Just a few years later, when I smashed the window in the G.P.O. and started shooting, it was at those that I was aiming, in the window display across the street in Tyler's.) You coughed when you ate bad food or none. When you'd never worn a coat. When everyone else around you coughed. (94)

Henry's flash-forward to the Easter Rising begins Doyle's critique of middle-class Irish nationalism and names Henry as the true Irish hero who fights for the most oppressed among the

nation. Middle-class materialism is here not only a disturbing symptom of Irish colonial complacency but also an enemy in itself. Henry's fight is for survival in an Ireland more concerned with national independence than national well-being, with the rhetoric of revolution than the need for reform. As Henry's fellow rebels debate whether to put harps or starry ploughs on Irish money and mailbags post-independence, Henry considers himself "one of the few real soldiers there" because he has "nothing to go home to" (102).¹¹³

Doyle's invocation of the harp and starry plough against the dirt and hunger of Henry's "Dublinness" (117) reflects the novel's deconstruction of holistic (and holy) narratives of romantic Irish rebellion—those defined largely by symbols—and its privileging of the mean reality Henry and other slum-dwellers experience. Henry's name in fact reminds him—as the title reminds us—that there exists a much more appealing ideal version of himself, one which haunts him by the wholeness and brightness it can promise. Henry is the second Henry, named for his mother's first son lost to the squalor of the slums. Henry is "the other Henry. The shadow. The imposter" neglected and ignored as he screams the "right to be named" (39). Unlike his namesake, the dead baby transformed into a star by his mother's grief, Henry remains an imperfect and demanding reminder of life's brutality. Like the ideal Ireland of Yeatsian nationalism, the star called Henry never disappoints because it exists only in the symbolic realm. Henry's struggle evinces the forced recognition of the real Irish colony that survives into the modern world and must fight for the right to exist as an independent nation and be called Ireland. It is to this end that Doyle disrupts historical renderings of the Easter Rising and inserts the figure of the disabled and poor Irish subject. Henry contradicts the history books; "I'd played *The Last Post* at the grave of O'Donovan Rossa the year before," he says. "The history books will tell you that it was William Oman but don't believe them: he was tucked up at home with

the flu” (103). As a participant in the Rising, Henry indeed advocates for those not written into the nationalist plan. After reading a draft of the Proclamation, Henry tells Connolly that “there should be something in there about the rights of children.” As written, “the bit about the alien government” and “all that stuff about God” overshadow the needs of Ireland’s poor children, those for whom Henry is fighting (110). The Proclamation reflects the concerns of middle-class nationalists like Collins whose “well-fed puss” shows he’s never known hunger (117). When the Rising ends, Henry again almost makes history by way of “the famous photo” of de Valera surrendering. “I was beside the great man,” Henry says, “but [the photographer] wouldn’t see me....The first time I saw the photo my elbow was in it, but even that went in later versions” (156). Here Doyle’s voice is unmistakable—Henry, and those like him, remain on the margins of the nation’s official and “famous” history. They as well become the backward stones to trouble the de Valerian stream of rural idealism and hearth-and-home Republicanism. Through Henry’s rewriting of Irish history, *A Star Called Henry* thus troubles the history of the Easter Rising to show how easily certain Irish voices can be erased.

The Ireland of *A Star Called Henry* follows a trajectory of accomplishment and regression that critiques imperial policy, nationalist rhetoric, and national objectives as it charts the stunting effects of these programs on the Irish national body. The most important figure of disability in the novel is evoked largely by his absence—Henry Smart’s father pops in and out of the story but is always partially present via the wooden leg he leaves behind. His father’s account of having slain “sixteen Zulus with [his] freshly severed limb” immediately suggests disability as a weapon and makes heroic any lack the missing limb might project. Henry’s obsessive use of his father’s leg in battles of all kinds—with it he “whack[s] at the nose” of an angry school nun (89) and takes “a running swing at a Castle rozzer” (207)—in fact reflects an

Irish people who triumph in disability rather than seeking to overcome it. That a wooden leg is all Henry has of his father highlights an Irish legacy of stunted development passed down in the slums from one disadvantaged man to the next. It is Henry's courage and acceptance of the leg, though, that Doyle champions in the novel. As he cries "Up the Republic!" in the GPO during Easter Week, Henry hoists his father's leg and effectively claims the new Ireland for those who have previously been cast out of its imagined borders. Dublin, Henry tells us, "was suddenly full of one-legged men, their limbs left behind on the Empire's battlefields or under the screeching levers and wheels that powered Dublin's feeble industry" (54). It is for these that Henry fights and these that ultimately get left behind in Ireland's desire for national progress.

Unlike *At Swim, Two Boys*, which culminates in a representation of the Easter Rising, *A Star Called Henry* presents its most damning critique in the aftermath of the iconic rebellion through its portrayal of an Ireland turned against its own citizens. This revolutionary regression is foreshadowed, though, in the Rising itself. Henry's experience suggests a Rising at once more vivid and more realistic than the "terrible beauty" of "Easter, 1916." From the start, Doyle gives us action—"I held my left arm across my eyes and smashed the window," says Henry. "Glass was breaking all around me" (99). This initial activity is countered, though, by the ensuing days of confusion and ennui—"Day Two of the Revolution and I was already bored" (123). In this portrayal of the Rising, Doyle mocks the patriotism of Ireland's most fervent nationalists and reveals instead a bumbling collection of men concerned more with their own legacies than with actual Irish freedom. When Henry sees his fellow rebels "on their knees" praying "with their eyes clamped shut, their heads bowed and their cowering backs to the barricades," he decides if attacked by the British to jump to his death rather than dying in the "monastery" the rebels have made of the GPO (127). His position as outsider is clear—Henry is not middle-class and not

Catholic. He holds no stake in the Ireland he sees Pearse and Collins creating. Unlike Mr. Mack of *At Swim, Two Boys* and unlike the aristocratic persona of Yeats's memorial poem, Henry is proud to see Dublin's needy citizens looting the shops.¹¹⁴ Henry is ready to "turn [his gun] on the Volunteers who were itching to save Irish property" from the Irish people they saw stealing in the streets (129). Like Jamie O'Neill, Doyle inserts such internal Irish tension into his Rising account to reflect the splintering of Irish nationalism and the importance of recognizing the Irish subjects occluded by a particular national image. Henry's experience in the war of independence reiterates this turmoil and ultimately condemns narrow-minded Irish nationalism—rather than the imperialism it replaces—for creating the new Ireland's disabling environment.

A Star Called Henry offers the evolution of Kilmainham Gaol as its final critique of blood sacrifice and national ideals. Four months after his imprisonment for killing a Castle cop, Henry escapes with feet "sore and bleeding. A chunk of [his] brow [is] flapping over [his] left eye...ribs broken, toes smashed" (344). He is disabled by the national fight and beaten down by Empire in the very yard where his Rising comrades were executed. Imprisoned by the Empire's men, Henry emerges to find his wife beaten by IRA men. As he leaves Ireland at the novel's end, his wife resides in Kilmainham Gaol, a "jail now for the diehardwomen and girls...locked up by the Free State government" (379). That the "new masters" (363) of Ireland are Ireland's own has not stopped oppression nor guaranteed freedom. Rather, the new Irish powers-that-be display to Henry a frightening xenophobia toward Jews and other "strangers" that threaten their image of Irish purity. Even Henry, a necessary "trouble-maker" in the Rising's immediate aftermath is now too much trouble for a Free State government hoping to develop a successful and powerful Irish nation. In the end, Henry's desire to fight for the disenfranchised is at odds with a new fight that is "about control of the island...not the harps and martyrs and the freedom

to swing a hurley” (351). This disillusionment, while it critiques the same romanticism Henry himself decries, as well suggests the failure of all national projects intent on building a nation in which real independence is only for those with power and wealth. Henry leaves Ireland a wanted man, a criminal against the new government as he was against the old. Fittingly, this marginalized figure, edged out of the new Free State, leaves behind his daughter *Saoirse*, “a daughter called Freedom [he’d] held only once” (382). Despite Henry’s fight, he cannot truly grasp freedom in Ireland.

Henry’s position in the slums questions the elevated and often empty rhetoric of Irish nationalism, but it as well underscores the necessary inequality that Empire enacts. As a child, Henry is ignorant of nationalist concerns, and yet he shocks the crowd by screaming obscenities at King Edward VII upon a royal visit to Dublin. “Not at all” a Fenian or Sinn Feiner, Henry sees “the wealth and colour, the shining red face...and [knows] that [the King] didn’t come from Dublin” (59). Henry’s instinctual mistrust of the King and disdain for his pompous attitude toward the Dublin crowd suggest that the need for revolution is itself innate, necessary despite and beyond nationalist affiliations. Doyle replays this sentiment later in the novel, noting the slum kids’ confusion at the importance of national devotion. When asked if they “love Ireland,” Henry and Victor have no answer. Ireland, Henry says, “was something in songs that drunken old men wept about” (79). Henry’s fight is for equality of circumstance and the recognition of those, like his brother, that have died because they’ve been ignored and allowed to decompose in the plain view of British, Irish, and clerical authorities. Like Doyle’s *At Swim, Two Boys*, Henry’s nationalism is built on a need for a greater freedom than can come of changing the national flag. In fact, just as Henry the child does not identify with an abstract concept of the Irish nation, Henry the post-Rising teenager misses the return of the Easter Week prisoners and

much of the war for independence because he and the other dockers “didn’t have much time for republicanism.” They, and all of Ireland’s poor, must work “with their backs to the country” for any chance of economic survival (179). Ironically, though, Henry’s decision post-Rising to “reenlist” and join the Volunteers’ fight for independence is spurred by Jack Dalton’s promise to “go at every reminder of the Empire with a wrecking ball made from all the balls and chains that had fettered the people for centuries.” Knowing what a “small place” Jack Dalton’s Ireland would be and recognizing the idealization in his plan, Henry loves the idea “of knocking down Dublin and starting afresh” (191). He is especially drawn in by Dalton’s plan to build a bridge and name it after Henry. The anonymous slum kid finds patriotic fervor at the possibility of being named and counted. To the end, Henry fights for a freedom that transcends empty rhetoric and offers real justice to the oppressed. He fights against a system that makes the people of Ireland “frightened by their betters...And that means virtually everybody they encounter outside of their own tight circle” (244). He rises up for the unnamed, “never hav[ing] given a fuck what de Valera sang in his prison cell” (192).

Colonial Embodiment and National Struggle in Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys*

Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys* charts the developing relationship of Jim Mack and Doyler Doyle, two young boys on the periphery of mainstream Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism. Jim is on the economic fringes of middle-class Dublin, Doyler a slum kid and badge-wearing socialist. Furthermore, the boys recognize a budding homosexuality that sets them apart even before they fully understand the nature of these desires. As Ireland moves supposedly toward Home Rule and the more fanatical Irish Republicans prepare for the Easter

Rising, Jim and Doyler's Dublin community faces its own crisis of identification and is itself at war concerning methods of representing Irishness. As Jim himself realizes, "politics was always a puzzle but now there were new ingredients to bother the brew: the working man and Gaelic-talking priests and the Red Hand badge that Doyler hid inside his lapel" (122). As the novel highlights the personal development of these two boys and privatizes the national struggle through their experience of the Easter Rising, it as well positions Jim and Doyler as the Irish element that stands outside the normative community but must, in the end, be rhetorically consumed by it. After Doyler's accidental martyrdom, Jim declares that he can swim no longer; he will "be a stone and he [will] sink" (556). O'Neill's use of the stone clearly recalls Yeats's "Easter, 1916" and the much critiqued image of the "stone / To trouble the living stream" (181). Though Jim's use of the image reflects the personal trauma that results from Doyler's death, Jim and Doyler's "aberrant" nationalism is the stone of dissent that troubles a narrowly-defined Irish community. In their quest for self-determination, the boys indeed fashion an Irish nationalism that is set against normative values and suggests an alternate mode of being Irish.

In a scathing critique of Yeats's "Easter, 1916," Margot Backus suggests that *At Swim, Two Boys* "strategically refutes Yeats's poem and its legacy" by "disentangling...the dissenting nationalist perspectives from the web of representation in which they were ensnared by Yeats's poem."¹¹⁵ Likewise, in a comprehensive reading of O'Neill's queer Irish nationalism, Joseph Valente notes that *At Swim, Two Boys* and the literary tradition from which it springs "[witness] the amenability of a nationalism that assumes or mandates normative forms of Irish identity."¹¹⁶ Both critics point to what Valente calls the "conflict within the Irish ranks over the preferred terms of collective self-definition" (63).¹¹⁷ *At Swim, Two Boys* functions thus according to Backus as "a socialist and homoerotic elegy for strands of nationalism that struggled for their

existence” in the course of the Rising and were “killed retroactively” by the rhetoric of “an apolitical and heroic ‘terrible beauty’” espoused by Yeats’s commemorative poem (77). Though Backus’s reading focuses on the transvaluation of Connolly’s socialism to middle-class nationalism and Valente’s on the queering of Irish identity, both highlight tensions inherent within the Irish community and the elision of difference by the middle-class Catholic nationalism that emerges as all-consuming after the martyrdom of the Easter rebels. Both are quite right in noting the rhetorical erasure of Irish difference and O’Neill’s reinscription of an Irishness that in its queerness and complexity challenges the Irish nationalism associated with the Easter Rising. *At Swim, Two Boys*, I argue, figures the Irish body as the site where these tensions are registered and expressed. The body functions as the receptor of colonial violence—evidenced by the reference to imperial murder and the boys’ desire to reverse this colonial trauma; the center of a liberating communal expression—highlighted most through Jim and Doyler’s sexual intimacy; and the victim of national violence exemplified by the blindly exclusive Irish nationalism represented by middle-class militants and Catholic Church authority. Jim and Doyler’s position outside any kind of normative Irish nationalism is highlighted further by the constant intrusion of Mr. Mack’s West Britonism and the suggestion that successful development can be equated with material success and, more generally, Anglicization. While the novel focuses explicitly on Jim and Doyler’s search for alternative modes of Irishness, it as well chronicles Jim’s father’s quest for respectability.

While Mr. Mack’s bumbblings provide comic relief to the novel and he clearly parodies the West Britonism that exists alongside the era’s nationalist fervor, his insistent desire for respectability and acceptance from the upper-middle-class Irish and English also reflects Irish acceptance of imperial rhetoric that characterizes them as unfit for self-determination and

stability. The acceptable alternative, Mr. Mack's journey suggests, is an equally unquestioning devotion to Catholic Church authority and an equally impotent role in one's own identification. We first meet Mr. Mack buying an *Irish Times*, a paper, Mr. Doyle proclaims, "Either for Protestants...or lunatics altogether" (5). In this instance, Mr. Mack's devout Catholicism is overshadowed by his desire for the social respectability that may come with buying an expensive newspaper. These two sites of identification plague Mr. Mack throughout the novel, neither offering him satisfaction. Mr. Mack embodies at once two strains of Irishness that over-determine the boundaries of acceptable Irish character and that would exclude Jim and Doyler on political and moral grounds. In his blind adherence to Catholic Church ritual and his obsession with material wealth and social advancement, Mr. Mack represents a confused Irish community clinging to all forms of authority for some sense of accomplishment and acceptance. Mr. Mack's pride in Jim's attendance at Presentation confirms this; Presentation, Fr. O'Toiler asserts, is nothing but "a college for Castle Catholics" (103). Mr. Mack's belief that the "Macks was on the up" (11) hinges on social position and the approval of two institutions that clearly do not consider his welfare.

O'Neill displays through Mr. Mack's development the confusion and ambiguity inherent in defining the "nationalism" of the Irish colonial. Mr. Mack is nothing if not obliging to all who seek to define him. And yet, he is in some ways the most officially maligned of the novel's characters. He is arrested three times in the course of one year, each time being further humiliated and yet somehow further emboldened to prove his worth as a respectable Irishman defined by terms of British respectability. After questioning Doyler's "national" commitment to the Crown—"Under the picture of King George the pile of mess had risen. Odd how he managed to slop his swill at that place every time"—Mr. Mack is arrested for defacing military

recruitment posters, a crime for which Doyler is actually responsible (42). Mr. Mack's accidental betrayal haunts him through the rest of the text—after the arrest, Jim says, “he’s been on the perpetual polishing his [war] medals.” Doyler’s response that Mr. Mack needn’t worry because he “is known for a Britisher true and blue” confirms Mr. Mack’s allegiance to the Crown but also shows the futility of this devotion. He is arrested twice more for rebellious behavior though he has no ambitions to rebel (124). In an equally comic turn, Mr. Mack seeks support from Father O’Toiler and is quickly dismissed until he proves a satisfying degree of dissatisfaction with imperial rule. Father O’Toiler’s trite recitation that “the law, even the inequitable laws of the foreigner, is to be observed” is quickly replaced with staunch enthusiasm when he learns that Mr. Mack has been arrested for tearing recruitment posters (143). This accidental rebellion makes Mr. Mack, in Father O’Toiler’s Church, a true Irishman. The question of authentic Irishness—and its relation to (or distance from) outward acts of rebellion and acquiescence—is explored at length through Mr. Mack’s struggle to gain acceptance. That O’Neill portrays Mr. Mack both comically and sympathetically ultimately suggests a tragic misidentification among the Irish themselves with British ideals of respectability and furthermore a self-defeating tendency to accept, rhetorically at least, foreign domination. In Mr. Mack’s relationship with his old comrade Mr. Doyle, O’Neill shows an equally depressing alternative to emulation of British respectability.

Before portraying Jim and Doyler’s strength of friendship and suggesting through them a mode of Irishness for the future, O’Neill first displays through their fathers the crippling effects of past Irish capitulation to imperial abuses. The novel’s first character interaction comes between Mr. Mack and Mr. Doyle, emblems of a past life before the current surge of revivalist fervor and call for rebellion. Like Brother Polycarp—who represents Catholic Church personnel

from the days when “it was a pandy on the palm for speaking Erse” (53)—Mr. Mack and Mr. Doyle represent an age of national pride defined by fighting “for Queen and Country” under the flag of Empire. Though their friendship, like Jim and Doyler’s, seems at first to hinge on fighting side by side, the immediate tension apparent in their relationship reflects a divergence that O’Neill brilliantly binds to images of “national” character, ability, and development. Faux-nostalgic replaying of their Dublin Fusilier/Boer War days informs us that Mr. Doyle and Mr. Mack were the original “pal o’ me heart” duo their sons are now unconsciously imitating. The two men were in fact dubbed “Mick and Mack” during their military days, nicknames that suggest a pre-determined, simplified, and homogeneous characterization of Irishness and the Irish soldier. This sense of equality is shattered during their service days by Mr. Mack’s budding desire for the kind of power and prestige we still see him chasing fifteen years later. In 1915 when the men reconnect, they occupy two very different strains of Irishness that both suggest the disabling power of Empire.

As Mr. Mack’s aspirations to respectability and social position as shopkeeper suggest his affinity with imperial power structures and align him with British sympathies, Mr. Doyle’s poverty and disability seem to authenticate in him an Irishness that reflects the crippling realities of colonial subjugation. Mr. Doyle’s character is defined almost entirely by his physical suffering and, initially at least, his cutting comments that undermine Mr. Mack’s bravery and threaten his respectable West Briton façade. The implication that Mr. Mack “cut and run” from the Boers while Mr. Doyle was left to fight neatly parallels the later divide between the two men. Mr. Doyle’s physicality is countered always with Mr. Mack’s mental musings; the Doyle squalor is countered always with Mack pretension. In the first exchange of the novel, Mr. Mack finds Mr. Doyle sick and poor, never expecting to find him “this far gone.” His coughing fits are

“wretched to watch, like something physical had shook hold the man” (7). Mr. Mack’s discomfort in the face of Mr. Doyle’s consumptive pall can be traced, we suspect, to the history between them but also to Mr. Mack’s forced exposure to an Irish people not interested in imitating or able to replicate British middle-class material ambition. The Doyle family in fact represents in the novel a physically disabled Irish whose spirit and grace are championed despite physical suffering. MacMurrough later envies Doyler’s spirit and suggests “there can be no power over him who freely gives” as Doyler does (163). Likewise, MacMurrough’s Aunt Eva—the strong woman intent on an outward display of bravery and bravado in some ways akin, though politically antithetical, to Mr. Mack’s too-loud praising of Empire—feels true sympathy for Doyler’s mother, the “proud and undaunted” washerwoman who sings softly as she carries “her humble burden” (108). In their supposed mediocrity, the Doyle family presents alongside Mack mock-respectability a sense of true Irish suffering and true Irish worth. Jim registers this opposition most poignantly—Doyler, he notes, “was not bemeaned by his life as Jim felt bemeaned by his” (137). As the novel explores and challenges the prescribed behaviors and definitions of acceptable Irishness, O’Neill returns us always to the suggestion that a true Irishness transcends these limits and is unashamed of perceived disabilities.

Mr. Mack’s indignation at Mr. Doyle’s condition—“Consumption, my eye. Of spirituous liquors is what it is”—is thus equally interesting. His many references to Mr. Doyle’s alcoholism both remind us of actual Irish self-defeat through self-indulgence and suggest Mr. Mack’s tendency to blame the Irish for their own troubles. Degrade them as he will, though, the Doyles return throughout the novel as reminders to Mr. Mack that his illusions cannot withstand his historical moment or his obligation to his own countrymen despite his desire for recognition. After he has given up his pretensions to comfort Mr. Doyle in his dying moments, Mr. Mack

feels “sad” and “cheated.” With his sense of Mr. Mack’s falseness, Mr. Doyle “thiev[es] the happy times from his past.” Directly after, the environment of King Street—named, Doyler has already noted, for “an occupying power” (204)—assaults Mr. Mack with the realities of “evictions up and down the street” where “children were bawling, [and] women were tugging at their belongings” (487-8). That Mr. Mack goes to comfort Mr. Doyle as he dies—this reconnection also coincident with the Easter Rising—signals perhaps an inclusive notion of national belonging and character based on empathy and shared history. That Mr. Mack is still relatively unmoved by the suffering of those who, like Mr. Doyle, cannot overcome economic and physical subjugation does reflect, though, the consuming power of imperial rhetoric and the desire to reject one’s own people for the sake of a palatable self-image. It is at the heart, as well, of Mr. Mack’s insistence that “no pals except you’re equals. I learnt me that after I got my very first stripe” (10). We find later that Mr. Mack got that “first stripe” after cradling “Poor old Mick” in his arms and saving him “from death’s door” (311). Thereafter, Mr. Mack takes a position of authority over Mr. Doyle and chastises him for greasy uniform buttons—a taunt that will haunt their relationship until Mr. Doyle’s last breath. Mr. Mack’s experience in the war suggests an exclusive model of camaraderie that privileges self-aggrandizement over communal accomplishment. Though Jim is clearly influenced by his father’s rhetoric and thinks regrettably about his own tendency to dread “the squalor he would find” in Doyler’s home and the dirt-faced children” clinging to the washerwoman’s skirts, Jim ultimately finds his own “country” in Doyler and thus negates his father’s insistence on an Irishness that ignores the gritty realities of British occupation and Irish inability. *At Swim, Two Boys* confronts this tension often and in varied forms as it explores the concept of Irishness in a historical moment that brings into conflict definitions of Irish character and potential political modes of Irishness.

Mr. Mack's and Mr. Doyle's military history underscores the tensions of Irish colonial identification by asserting the perpetual Irish obligation to fight *for* Empire amidst the dire need of a true fight *against* it. Their now-gone past parallels Gordie's absent presence throughout the novel—he too is fighting for Empire amidst the national search for some form of Irish independence. Gordie, Jim tells us, “had joined the Irish Volunteers that drilled to fight the Ulster Volunteers that drilled to fight Home Rule...they all joined up and were drilling together now to fight the Hun.” Gordie's role in the novel is clearly to represent an Irishness always sacrificed for the betterment of Empire. Mr. Mack's and Aunt Sawney's dedication to British ideals despite this sacrifice is most chilling— Mr. Mack still believes that through this service Ireland will “stand among the dominions” and Aunt Sawney “curse[s] for Fenians” those “all-for-Ireland boys” who do not enlist (122). Gordie's own final assertion that the soldiers' fight “is Ireland's fight” and that he will soon proudly “parade through the streets of Dublin” suggests that Mr. Mack has effectively passed his naïve expectations and colonial complacency to a new generation of Irishmen. The image of parading soldiers also ominously prefigures the perpetual walking of Gordie's ghost and the humiliating parade of Easter rebels who dare fight against the Empire rather than for it. Mr. Mack's continued insistence that it was “grand to be a part of it, this great empire at war, its fighting men sent forth not for gain but for honor” further highlights his ignorance of the real consequences facing his family and his country. This sense of honor seems dependent on the coda he adds: “and Dublin its second city” (45). This belief as well shows an overinflated sense of Ireland's worth to the controlling powers. In this same scene, Mr. Mack reads of “British gallantry” and wonders “did British include Irish? Why wouldn't they be done with it and say Irish gallantry?” (45). We find later that British, quite expectedly, does not include Irish in these circumstances. While Gordie is left behind as missing-in-action and

presumed dead, the news comes that “the British had evacuated from Gallipoli. ‘Without Single Loss of Life’” (307). Gordie’s life is destroyed in the worst possible way—he remains always in-between, unfulfilled, unheroic, lost. His fight has neither redeemed Ireland nor legitimized Mr. Mack’s aspirations. He is a lost Irishman in an Empire that speaks only of British heroism. Mr. Mack’s insistent pride in the face of this imperial abuse underscores his inability to throw off the authorities that define his actions. In his own devotion and his lectures to Jim, we see his desire for British respectability equaled only by a staunch devotion to Catholic Church doctrine and policy despite its flaws and abuses. Jim’s struggle throughout the novel to detach from a powerful sense of Catholic power (and the attendant Catholic guilt) suggests a new generation of Irishness that challenges Irish Catholicism rather than being erased by it.

The Catholic Church, represented alternately in the novel by the drunken and sexually abusive Brother Polycarp and the Gaelic-League lackey Father O’Toiler, wields a powerful idea of acceptance over the two boys who do not fit within its parameters. Jim, we find, has been systematically abused by the Brother who simultaneously molests him and suggests a religious vocation as retreat from sexual deviancy and the resultant shame of sexual vices. In a decisive turning point of Jim’s disidentification with the national Church and growing identification with Doyler, Jim is saved from a bout of sexual molestation when Doyler interrupts the proceedings and incurs Brother Polycarp’s wrath. The Brother ousts Doyler from the chapel on economic and political grounds—Doyler is, in the Brother’s words a “Little born-in-the-gutter” whose socialist “extremism” threatens the respectable and overtly submissive nationalism the Church espouses (120). Brother Polycarp’s violent reaction to Doyler’s socialist values overshadows for the moment his physical abuse of Jim, an invasion of the Irish body perpetrated not by the colonizer but by the supposed exemplar of national values and the holy institution the growing

Irish nation pits against British culture. Though Jim is still at this point disturbed by Doyler's blasphemy against the Church, his ultimate rejection of the Church upon Doyler's death—represented by Jim's fallen rosary beads—reinforces the primacy of his communion with Doyler who is considered throughout a “devil” who plagues Irish Catholicism from within.

The very physical violence the Irish “mob” later inflicts on Doyler exemplifies the role of the Catholic Church in creating a very specific brand of nationalism that rejects those who fall outside its purview. Valente reminds us that “the gravitational pull of nationalism...is always to reestablish social and sexual norms” (82). Doyler is repeatedly identified by his socialist badge, that which represents his political values and his place outside the community. When, at the Volunteer rally/garden party, Doyler is beaten for his extremist views, he is brought forth with “head drooped in subjection” and paraded by the priest as an example of “the black devil” and the “manifold perils that beset [the sainted isle]” (287-288). Doyler's badge has been torn away and now his exposed nipple stands in as “a pathetic emblem” of the Irish subject who dares profess an Irishness not in line with normative social and sexual values. O'Neill alludes on several occasions to the “evil” link forged in Jim and Doyler's community between socialism and unacceptable sexuality. When Jim approaches his father with questions about socialism, Mr. Mack steps in suddenly with a lecture on the evils of masturbation: ““There's been something on my mind,” Jim says. ““Don't do it,' [Mr. Mack] let out. ‘Do what?’ ‘Say a prayer instead. It does go away, the urge will.’ ... ‘Da, it's about socialism.’ ‘Socialism?’ ‘It's been on my mind to know what it is’.” After his clearly rehearsed aphorisms on masturbation—“Say no more about it now,” “Sleep with your hands like so,” “Let the word Jesus be the last on your lips,” “it'll leave you insane in the end”—Mr. Mack's discomfort and hesitation on the topic of socialism suggests that it presents an even stronger, because less defined and less controlled, threat to the

kind of respectable Catholic Irishness he upholds (110). Mr. Mack's religious rhetoric regarding socialism also suggests that his views on its acceptability are drawn from Church teaching or, at the very least, his inability to understand a doctrine outside it. Socialism, he says, involves "Greed, envy, pride—sloth...Oh, all the sins." The collusion in this conversation of socialism and masturbation does imply that both simply "[stand] for what's wrong" (111). Likewise, Jim first suspects—and the reader is first assured—of Doyler's involvement with MacMurrough when he glimpses Doyler's Red Hand badge on the floor in the MacMurrough foyer—this immediately after being unsettled by "the way [MacMurrough's] eyes felt free to ramble over him" (151). As it explores the boys' homosexuality, the novel indeed explicitly links sexuality and the body to changing definitions of national character and a chaotic experience of Ireland at war with itself, with Empire, and for Empire. In a Joycean montage, O'Neill displays Jim's racing thoughts as he lies in bed and eventually gives in to his sexual urges: "Pal of my heart. Wished I hadn't seen that...Mice in the shop...a baton coming down on a newsboy's leg...Lusitania, he was calling...Soldier in the mud with his legs missing...Our Lady clothes with the sun and the moon at her feet...No clear idea what a socialist does" (74). As Jim's meditations on religious superstition, his absent brother, and political upheaval culminate in sexual release, O'Neill shows sexual frustration and desire as yet another burden for Jim to face. To masturbate—and through masturbation—Jim can "shut his eyes from the gaze of Our Lord and the reddening gaze of King George and Sir Redvers Buller, and he [can cross] out the image of Brother Polycarp's face" (75). Mr. Mack's comment, though, that masturbating will leave Jim "insane in the end" reaffirms the powerful existence in Jim's life of a Catholic Church that threatens with disability those unable to live by its rules of ascetic behavior and sexual self-denial. Much of Jim's journey thus demands his negotiation of sexual desire and spiritual

devotion in a way neither his father (nor his Church) can understand. Jim's Irishness depends on his ability to find an Irish character that is Irish without depending on preapproved standards set largely by Catholic doctrine. As the novel approaches this tension, it weaves Jim's moral ambiguity with contemporaneous upheaval regarding Church-approved modes of Irish nationalism.

In line with its explicit problematization of definitions of Irishness and ethno-national authenticity, *At Swim, Two Boys* also showcases an important division in Catholic Church policy and attitude toward Irish character and Irish independence. This division maps neatly onto Mr. Mack's West Briton/Catholic identity and is represented in the novel by the two clerics—Brother Polycarp and Father O'Toiler—who each inflicts his own brand of suffocating authoritative rhetoric. While Brother Polycarp's sexual abuse of Jim may suggest, as Valente notes, "that the reproduction of Ireland's national church entails the circulation of undecidedly homosocial/homoerotic desire" (60), it more generally reflects that the perpetuation of Catholic homogeneity in Ireland comes at the expense of the Irish people. Jim's intense levels of shame and his confusion regarding sexual urges are clearly compounded by his exposure to a Catholic authority who insists on doctrines of self-denial while encouraging a cult of secret self-indulgence. Brother Polycarp's Anglicized character also suggests a Catholic Church doubly oppressive of its Irish fold. Following Brother Polycarp's example and accepting a vocation to religious life would effectively condemn Jim to a life of quiet self-denial dependent on the quashing of any real self-identification or actualization. It is significant, then, that Jim only truly escapes Brother Polycarp's spiritual and mental hold when, after a fever, he finds MacMurrough by his bedside; MacMurrough "seemed to Jim a silver knight, opening his window and banishing gloom" (368). The added information that Brother Polycarp has died of a stroke seems somehow

less important. Jim's decision to join Brother Polycarp's "community" as a way to circumvent his "sinful" inclinations and create an acceptable identity is rather negated by the security and acceptance he feels in communion with MacMurrough (and later with Doyler). Brother Polycarp's suffocating brand of respectable middle-class Catholicism—a combination of values Mr. Mack clearly emulates and tries to pass on to Jim—thus denies Jim access as it forms him through its denial of his needs. Alternately, Father O'Toiler's brand of suffocating Irish nationalism initially influences the boys as it suggests an alternative site of identification but still clearly limits the bounds of acceptable national image.

Through his use of two divergent Church authority figures, O'Neill dramatizes the surge of revivalist fervor that ultimately culminates in the Easter Rising and, perhaps more importantly for Jim and Doyler, begins to suggest new forms of Irish identification. That these "new" revivalist forms in fact pretend to ancient roots is of no consequence; rather, O'Neill examines the Revival's role in stirring Irish desire for self-definition and, necessarily so, the ultimate dangers of supplanting one narrowly-defined national rhetoric with another. In his 1892 speech "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland," Douglas Hyde comprehensively attacks Irish cultural practice and sentiment for its complete identification with and emulation of all things English. It is "curious," Hyde remarks, "how [Irish sentiment] continues to apparently hate the English, and at the same time continues to imitate them; how it continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so" (154). With passionate appeal, Hyde argues for the necessity of reviving distinctively Celtic literature, athletics, place names, surnames, and, of highest importance, language.¹¹⁸ The "losing of [Irish language] is," he says, "our greatest blow," and we must "put an end to the shameful state of feeling" that marks the speaking of Irish (160). Though Hyde

asserts that the reclaiming of cultural and linguistic Irishness is “no political matter” and suggests it be done “even at the risk of encouraging national aspirations,” his appeal to Irish exceptionalism and founding of the Gaelic League spark an intense desire to assert an authentic Irishness with claims not only to culture but to self-governance as well (170). Cultural nationalism’s emphasis on the language question finds a prominent place in *At Swim, Two Boys*, often as an object of ridicule and critique. Eva MacMurrough, the novel’s most militant and dedicated nationalist, supports such cultural concerns as language preference only for the furthering of real political agendas. In the face of Father O’Toiler’s over-use of pat Irish phrases, Eva recognizes Irish as “a gracious language, if somewhat limited of expression” and notes that “she had never known so obliging a tongue” (100, 103). Father O’Toiler’s Irish seems only for the use of prayers and pleasantries, a fact echoed by Doyler who claims the priests “think our native tongue is good for nothing but praying in... They think there’s no words in it for, I don’t know, anything the priests is against.” Father O’Toiler’s actions justify Doyler’s belief that the priests would “have [the Irish] blessing [themselves] in Gaelic the day long” and highlight the inefficiency of this plan. “What worth is a blessing,” Doyler asks, “for an ignorant heathen whoring bastard working Irish man?” (89). Father O’Toiler’s Irish program thus demonstrates a strain of nationalism that hopes (quite naively) to create authentic Irishness through an outward display of preapproved Irish qualities. His brand of cultural nationalism also reflects a nationalist view that would ultimately erase all aberrant strains of Irishness by mythologizing the Easter Rising. Amidst the violent rebellion, Father O’Toiler, who had previously denounced such social and sexual aberrance, declares the Easter rebellion “indeed a Catholic rising and therefore a blessed one.” His belief that the Protestant orange of the republican flag would “soon fade...to Vatican yellow” (495) enforces the Church’s need to subsume all difference and create

new totalizing narratives to replace those of British imperialism. This form of nationalism attempts to nullify the Irishness Jim and Doyler eventually establish through their conquering of Muglins Island and their sexual union.

In *At Swim, Two Boys*, the nationalism spurred by Hyde's particular brand of cultural revivalism is clearly reflected in Father O'Toiler who comes—in a microcosm of the national uprising itself—to dethrone Brother Polycarp who, he believes, is “Englified beyond redemption” (103). Father O'Toiler indeed references Hyde's efforts: “For the past twenty years,” he tells Eva MacMurrough, “the Gael has been crying aloud for help to beat back the Anglicization that drags its slimy length along.” His belief that Anglicization is stunting Irish development is matched only by his conviction that the Church can indeed lead the charge against such regression of Irish sentiment. To the chagrin of Brother Polycarp, Father O'Toiler asserts of the Church and Ireland that the “two are inseparable” (98). Brother Polycarp presents a rather demeaning attitude to Father O'Toiler's patriotism and a rather gentrified reaction to his suggestion of “A Nation Once Again” for the band's repertoire—Father O'Toiler, he tells Jim, seems “to be under the impression we are a band of rapparee fifers” (52). The Brother's disgust at the new priest's touting of the Irish language as well displays his affinity with Anglicized Irishness and suggests changing attitudes toward Irish self-definition and national pride. Importantly, it is Father O'Toiler's devotion to the Irish language and to some ideal of authentic Irishness that causes him to first reach out to the disenfranchised Doyler and then ultimately re-outcast him.

Like Jim, Doyler's character is throughout the novel couched largely in terms of his relationship to various definitions of Irishness and acceptable avenues of Irish development. In this way, Father O'Toiler's appearance on the scene allows Doyler a connection—via the flute

band—to an Irish Catholicism he otherwise rejects. The band also reflects O’Neill’s larger point about the inherent diversity of any national community and the ultimate prioritizing of desires effected by leaders of nationalist movements. Doyler joins the band to be close to Jim; Father O’Toiler leads the band to stir revivalist cultural pride; Eva MacMurrough supports the Irish language and placates Father O’Toiler to arouse fervor for a militant overthrowing of the British government. Coded in many ways as the most authentically Irish of the bunch, Doyler brings to Irish Catholicism a desire for true liberation that is threatening because it teaches rebellion against authority rather than the submission upon which the Church depends. He is welcomed into the band by Father O’Toiler because he initially fits the priest’s criterion for authentic Irishness:

“Dia agus Muire dhaoibh,” [the priest] said again. No one answered. “Did ye not hear me, boys? Dia...agus...Muire. God and Mary be with ye.”...“Have ye no Gaelic?” Silence. “No boy?” Mounting silence. “No Gaelic at all in the vaunted college of Presentation?” At last Doyler spoke. “Dia’s Muire dhuit’s Pádraigh, a hathair.” Clap went the priest’s hands....Good boy. There’s one true Irishman amongst ye, I am pleased to hear....[The boys] followed Doyler’s lead and sat down. (77-78)

In this moment alone, Doyler affects a partial union with Father O’Toiler’s Gaelic League values; soon after, though, he mocks the priest’s attempts to champion superficial behaviors and appearances as true Irishness. “A Nation Once Again” would be “Cod-Irish maybe,” Doyler says. “Like that priest’s cod-Irish name.” Doyler is hoping for some “real Irish” music, a request he follows with his own rendition of “God Save the King,” the “oddly familiar” tune “done into a jig.” Jim’s reaction—“Brother Polycarp would have been appalled, let alone the new father”—reminds us that despite what superficial affinities Doyler can display, he must remain outside the official nationalism[s] of the Church. That “the walls of the Forty Foot rang” with this reinvention of both a British anthem and an Irish jig clearly suggests that alternative brands of Irishness can be expressed only in such a free space—where “the regulars were all

sorts, Protestant and Catholic, clerks and clerics, all kinds of accents” (192). On official turf, Doyler’s national and religious revisionism receives immediate approbation. Thus his later assertion to Brother Polycarp that his is “the parish of St. Joseph’s...Patron of the working man” garners even more derision than his already troublesome presence in the Church (120). This irony highlights the Church’s unease with forms of rebellion that threaten its own primacy in the community. Doyler’s experience in County Clare—representing “the West of Ireland,” revivalist-endorsed seat of authentic Gaelic origins—presents a similar rebuke of the Church’s false monopoly on true Irishness. “They have a saying down Clare way,” Doyler says, regarding “the four cautions: Beware a woman in front of you, beware a horse behind you, beware a cart beside you, and beware a priest every which way” (122-123). His experience at St. Joseph’s clearly justifies this caution. As Brother Polycarp and Father O’Toiler vie for control of the parish and push particular personal and political agendas, they are, in the end, effective only at misguiding, abusing, and marginalizing Jim and Doyler. When Brother Polycarp returns as head of the parish and overturns Father O’Toiler’s nationalist work—“Irish classes removed from the parish hall, the Volunteers no longer paraded after Mass...prayers were said for the King and votive Masses offered against the Turks”—Jim notices a telling similarity in the two clerics’ sermons. Brother Polycarp’s rants are the same as Father O’Toiler would give, “save the heathen then had been English” (304). This clever colluding of the two clerics’ agendas evinces O’Neill’s critique of empty religious and political rhetoric amidst a need for real change. Thus, rather than converting the boys with their rigorous doctrines, the clerics eventually forfeit control to the boys themselves as they seek true communion and their own identity beyond Irish Catholic bounds.

As he proclaims Doyler's Irishness, O'Neill also presents in his character an amalgamation of all things deemed outside the fold of Irish national image, proper Catholic values, and social respectability. Doyler's poverty, his sexuality, and his socialist views all challenge accepted ideas and images of Irish character. His position outside this space of respectability is highlighted by his physical disability and by his refusal to blend harmoniously into a nationalism based on Irish sameness rather than diversity. Unlike Jim who initially seems intent on following a prescribed path of behavior and is clearly, like his father, acutely aware of his own image in the community, Doyler from the start represents the possibility of proud difference and self-determination. Jim and Doyler each receives mockery from the Presentation school boys because of inferior social standing, but Doyler's ability to fight back rather than cower inspires Jim to build a community of acceptance rather than trying, like his father, to access a community that demeans him. Doyler's rebellious spirit and his use of the Irish language further entices Jim: "[Jim] had time to glimpse a cloudy, mismatched suit sail by, then a kick in its leg sent Fahy's case scattering. 'Gabh mo leithscéal,' said Doyler when he landed. 'That's excuse me in our native tongue'....Jim stared toward the door, moving his lips to the Gaelic phrase....The mix of quaint and Gaelic struck him as fantastical in the school commons" (50). Jim's reaction to Doyler's behavior further underscores a divide in the national community—Jim is awe-struck and desires Doyler's friendship; the other boys brand Doyler a "stinker and a cripple," thus highlighting his supposed unfitness for their nationalist band. Jim's acceptance of Doyler at the moment he is outcast on the grounds of poverty and disability suggests long before their sexual union the formation of an Irish community outside normative parameters. As important as this communion is, though, the slow progress toward union and Jim's difficulty in shaking Catholic morality suggests an Irish reluctance to explore new modes

of Irishness and new forms of self-expression. O'Neill indeed suggests throughout an Irish tendency toward self-inflicted disability and stunted development that must be curbed before the realization of nationalist aspirations.

Jim and Doyler each displays a form of self-punishment that clearly suggests Irish national disability that compounds imperial abuses and cruelties. Jim's failed attempt to confess his "sin" of homosexual activity—a "sin" that drives him to the Catholic confessional, dependent as it is on the creation and institutional absolution of shame—again reflects the Church's inability to accommodate, in Jim's words, "such aberrance" (358), and Jim and Doyler's position outside the Church's form of Irishness. His subsequent self-punishment despite official absolution re-inscribes his Catholic devotion and displays the near-impossibility of forming an identity not dependent on Catholic codes of behavior. Jim in fact views himself as disfigured and spiritually bankrupt because of his indulgence in the "solitary vice" of masturbation: "the mark was on his face, plain to see, if he could bare to look, in his sallow skin, his dull eyes, in their maniacal blink" (353). O'Neill's combination here of physical and spiritual degeneracy—Jim's physical features take on a "maniacal" character—reinforces a link between physical disability and acceptable participation in an idealized national and religious community. It as well suggests that refusal to follow Church rules effectively destroys and dehumanizes the perpetrator. Jim's amazement that the Church "should see so far ahead, so deeply inside the soul, that...she planned for all the twistings and quibblings of conscience" further enforces the notion that there is no Irishness or humanity beyond Church walls. In a ten-page meditation that clearly parallels the fire-and-brimstone sermons of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, O'Neill tragically evokes a sense of despair and moral imprisonment that indicates the stifling influence of Church morality on Jim's own sense of self-worth. That Jim's homosexual behavior

is, unlike the “solitary vice” of masturbation, so outside the purview of Church morality is even more crippling—it is the fact that the priest “had not understood his sin” that most haunts Jim and begins to outcast him to the extent that he alone feels “marked” as a subhuman villain. Jim’s struggle and his desire to punish and prevent these urges echoes the novel’s cursory though recurring nod to a discussion of homosexuality’s role in defining one’s “nature.” This concern comes via Anthony MacMurrough’s reflections on his friendship with the now deceased Scrotes. MacMurrough’s word-choice here is significant; his friend Scrotes had begun to think, MacMurrough tells Doyler, that “we had a nature our own, which was not another’s perverted or turned to sin” (246). The issue of perversion is an important one along an Irish spectrum of acceptable ability and character. Jim’s quest indeed suggests a need for an Irishness that encapsulates different ways of being without considering difference to be mere perversion of an acceptable norm.

At Swim, Two Boys indeed suggests through its portrayal of Jim and Doyler a sense of Irish wholeness that the boys somehow forfeit because of their status outside a normative community. Jim’s feelings of inferiority and deviancy relate almost exclusively, as we have seen, to Catholic rhetoric regarding guilt and shame. At his niece’s baptism, Jim’s own desire for spiritual cleansing is revealed—“there was no touching him these days and he was for ever at the wash-bowl. He washed his face so hard, he rubbed the smiles away” (349). After his botched confession, Jim enacts his own penance, stopping all eating “save bread, and drinking, save water.” Despite nightly devotions and pleadings for forgiveness, Jim believes it a “sacrilege on sacrilege” that he is godfather to his niece (359). Jim’s niece of course represents in her own existence the failings of her father Gordie, Jim’s brother, to deny his own sexual urges and follow Church teaching. The family’s reaction to the baby’s birth, though, signals yet another

breakdown in the Church's attempt to dictate personal feeling. Nancy, the baby's mother, relishes in "showing the little babba off" despite its illegitimate status. O'Neill reminds us, though, that she is parading the baby "not to the street, never mind the street, the street was only ignorant." Likewise, it is "plain badness" that the curate would highlight her status as unwed mother. It is significant that O'Neill dismisses these two groups—the street people (nation) and the curate (Church)—and that Nancy celebrates the child's birth despite their attempt to quiet her. She shows the baby off "to the daylight and let[s] her know there was a sun up there and a blue sky to shine out of, and she'd know, without even knowing she knew, the joy it was with the sun on your face." Nancy's disregard of these stifling narratives suggests, as Ireland approaches new kinds of freedom, that the baby—whose birth is coincident with Jim's first homosexual encounter—represents a new generation not beholden to these confining standards. The reality, though, is that Nancy allows the baby "only the hint of [the sun]" and keeps "her eyes out of the glare for fear it might wake [her] and she'd go all dazzled" (349). Her reluctance echoes MacMurrough's earlier description of Ireland as a place of "a lazy freedom which you don't really know what to do with" (180). Accordingly, the Mack family reflects the Catholic Irish who, when cast out of Catholic favor, clamor to get back in rather than building new forms of self-definition. Their disabilities are thus shown as imperfections able to be healed by reinscription in the Irish Catholic community. O'Neill shows through Doyler the more damaging consequence of one's desire to form an alternative brotherhood and disavow conventional middle-class Irishness. Most importantly, Doyler's position outside an acceptable norm and his refusal to abide by these acceptable narratives is equated always with physical disability and infectious disease.

Through his characterization of Doyler, O'Neill presents the labeling of the disabled that characterizes the Irish Revival, the Free State and eventually the Republic. O'Neill introduces Doyler, his socialist, homosexual hero/martyr through the self-consciously "normal" and able gaze of Mr. Mack: "Vile job that...Way behind the times...The modern way means this fellow's out of an employment...Disease, all sorts you get with a job like that...Is that a limp I see? Bit of a hop there. Tries to bury it, but can't" (37-38). Doyler is immediately identified with a deformity that he both tries to hide and is unable to shake. Mr. Mack's association of Doyler with disease further complicates this description—infection is here identified with his work and thus his working-class status. Doyler's poverty forces him to be the dungman's lad and also ostracizes him from a clean, respectable Irishness. That this particular job is "behind the times" and not in line with "the modern way" further suggests that Doyler is unfit for the current historical moment. As Ireland moves toward independence—or, as Mr. Mack would have it, as Ireland takes its place as Britain's foremost colony—the inept and disabled like Doyler cannot contribute and are in fact destined to be obsolete. In novel time, Doyler will be labeled economically, spiritually, politically, sexually, and physically disabled before the year is out. His narrative trajectory exemplifies the physically disabling environment of working-class Ireland and the desire of mainstream Irish nationalism to distance itself from physical disability and metaphorically disable, or disempower, the developing Irishman who does not fit within prescribed nationalist parameters of belief and behavior. The reality of physical disability and assumed inability is thus coupled with Jim and Doyler's thwarted desire to project a sense of self and deviate from the hegemonic narratives of Irish nationalism. In an ironic twist to imperial narratives of Irish incapacity, the rhetoric of disability, physical deformation, and thus

moral/cultural ineptitude is recycled to condemn the individual who does not fit within the bounds of the conceived Irish nation.

O'Neill's emphasis on Doyler's physical deformities and his use throughout the novel of a rhetoric of disability and disenfranchisement suggest a link between moral/cultural aberrance and physical ineptitude. Even more importantly, O'Neill's exposure of these imperialist and nationalist tactics of identification eventually culminates in his assertion that the Irish are themselves creating an environment in which difference is perceived as deviance, diversity as disability. Such inability to recognize cultural difference is linked also in *At Swim, Two Boys* with Irish inability to develop a strong national community. O'Neill's most revealing critique of disabling Irish rhetoric is thus Irish capacity to disempower itself by passing down a legacy of weakness rather than strength. Mr. Mack's horror at Doyler's gritty appearance—"in muck he's covered," "how germs are spread"—and unease at Doyler's politically rebellious spirit—Mr. Mack mistakenly equates Doyler's Red Hand Badge with support for Ulster but is wary of it nonetheless—are mixed with a certain amount of pity for the plight Doyler has been born into (37-39). His life has been, Mr. Mack believes, "stunted by the failings of a father" (41). His discomfort in Doyler's presence parallels that he feels in his first encounter with Mr. Doyle who is selling the expensive newspapers Mr. Mack is frivolously buying. In *At Swim, Two Boys*, father and son Doyle represent a tradition of Irish disability and suffering as they also reflect a fighting spirit identified with true Irishness. Mr. Mack's belief that Mr. Doyle's failings have subsequently stunted his son's development haunts the text, though, as it reveals a spirit of exceptionality that leads only to actual disappointment and underdevelopment. O'Neill's meditation here on disability and disillusionment is—like many of the novel's grand philosophical conclusions—best voiced by MacMurrough: "one might choose to leave the

garden of Eden,” he says, “or one might dawdle there till expelled: either way, go one must” (373). MacMurrough ominously suggests that Jim and Doyler’s acceptance of their homosexuality means their fall, like his, from perfection and expulsion from a normative paradise. O’Neill in fact applies this metaphor across multiple narratives—Mr. Mack’s dreams of British respectability find no more realization than an Irish cultural nationalism that purports to represent true Irishness as it casts out those like Jim and Doyler who seek identification with it. The self-defeating tendency of these grand narratives is tied closely in the novel to Irish failure and, ultimately, disability itself. According to O’Neill’s assessment, the disabling rhetoric of British imperialism and centuries of malignant Celticism only begins a stunting of Irish development officially achieved through Irish acceptance of social inferiority and dependence on myths of deliverance that cannot reflect actual historical experience.

In one of the novel’s most moving and damning revelations, we find ultimately that Doyler’s limp—his defining physical deformity and the outward marker of his inner deviancy—is self-inflicted, an injury sustained not in an act of socialist rebellion but rather in a moment of frustration and rage characteristic of a pathetic struggle against a life of poverty and disappointment. It is significant that, before this moment, Doyler’s limp has been attributed to the Larkinite Lockout and thus equated with Doyler’s socialism—a “devil” to Irish Catholicism and a politics gaining little sympathy among respectable Irishmen. Doyler is, though, all ideals. He was in fact not present at the Larkinite riots but has fabricated the story because “he wouldn’t mind an odd limp getting it some way useful like that” (416). That Jim replays the image in his mind—“Jim thought of a baton coming down on a newsboy’s leg”—and is drawn to (though confused by) Doyler’s rebellious spirit suggests his desire to fight the status quo and form a communion with those his Irish community disowns. The reality that Doyler was “at home

beating the leg from under him with the leg of a chair he broke in his temper” suggests an Ireland to blame for its own lack of development. At the same time, though, Doyler’s rage “all for the price of him wanting to go to the college” reflects an economic helplessness for which Doyler is certainly not to blame and for which Irish nationalism has no regard. O’Neill’s revealing of the cause of Doyler’s impairment, in light of insistent emphasis on his disability and its powerful implications, aligns with his critical inclusion of a litany of failed Irish rebellions. As MacMurrough says, a rebellion that isn’t “madcaps...gone off half-cock” and even “Punch-like” wouldn’t be Irish (537). That these previous risings have failed, though, does not extinguish their importance. In fact, Wolf Tone’s 1798 Rising is present in *At Swim, Two Boys* no less than in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. At Wolf Tone’s grave, Jim first realizes his desire to fight for Ireland with Doyler by his side. The failings of the past in fact encourage and inspire the present crop of rebels to sacrifice themselves as others before have done. Likewise, more important than Doyler’s self-inflicted injury is his decision to admit his own failure to Jim. The intimacy of the two boys suggests the formation of a community in which disability does not matter—in his exuberance to reunite with Jim for their Easter swim, Doyler begins running, “sprinting and scarce a falter of his leg” (436). The perceived deformity that has so far defined Doyler is irrelevant in the face of the boys’ triumphant redefining of Irishness and national belonging.¹¹⁹

In chronologically conflating Jim and Doyler’s swim to Muglins Island, scheduled for Easter 1916, and the republican rising originally planned for the same day, O’Neill indeed suggests that the boys’ athletic feat constitutes its own rebellion of sorts and a type of nation-building for the pair. The swim itself and the ensuing celebration of their Muglins Island conquest reinforce O’Neill’s representation of the body as the site of true freedom from a narrowly-defined Irish identity and submission to oppression. In training for their swim, Jim and

Doyler assert their own bodily control over a history they see as defined by British violence and, ultimately, Ireland's betrayal of her own people. Before the swim, O'Neill inserts an insistent divide between the Easter Rising and the rising of Jim and Doyler:

"No Parades!" said the headline. "Volunteer Marches Canceled. A Sudden Order."

"What does it mean?" said Jim, coming impatient.

"I'll tell you what it means. It means we're free."

"Ireland?"

"Where would you go with Ireland? We are, you and me." He still couldn't believe it.

They had canceled the rising...He clapped Jim on the shoulders.

"We're in the swim!" he was saying. (446).

Jim and Doyler are (momentarily at least) free because they do not have to fight for an Ireland that marginalizes and dehumanizes them. As it signals a reclaiming of Ireland from British occupation, the conquering of the Muglins also suggests the building of new national identifications to replace the rhetorical and physical violence perpetrated by constraining strains of Irish nationalism. Their physical efforts will, in effect, reverse this trauma and reclaim Ireland for all its people. O'Neill recounts the climactic swim itself not as an abstract symbol of victory, but as a physical challenge over which the boys must assert their will and from which they must triumph. The closer they get to the Muglins, the more physically exerting their task—the "ache...in [Jim's] arms" becomes "doubled now or trebled" and "for all he strove, such small return: the Muglins refuse[s] to budge" (460). The green flag Doyler carries as a symbol of Irish victory becomes around his neck a "yoke" that only increases the "heaves and the pants and the shivery-shakes" that almost prevent the boys from communicating on their way to the destined spot. O'Neill's description of the journey is nothing if not explicitly physical.

The body overcomes these challenges, however, and Jim finds himself ultimately in tune with the water, losing his sense of "the sea's resistance" and "[feeling] instead its acceptance of him." When the boys arrive on the island, they raise their hands "aloft in champion style while

their bodies [glide] on,” exhausted but not defeated (461). And in their moment of triumph, talk of the rising returns, but its importance is elided by the intimacy the boys themselves have now fashioned and are about to consummate. Doyler dismisses the rising—“Was what planned? ...Oh that. I think so”—and with Jim’s declaration that he wants only “to be with [Doyler]” (464) the focus shifts to private intimacy. This combination of bodily exertion and emotional connection is fitting at this point, as O’Neill has charted throughout the novel the development of Jim and Doyler’s relationship as not only a coming to terms with and understanding of their physical desires but also as the founding of a spiritual bond that transcends physicality, boundaries, and ultimately the narrowly nationalist aspirations that proliferate in the Dublin community.

The initial bonding of Jim and Doyler is explicitly physical—Doyler takes a thorn and “prick[s] their palms and smear[s] their blood together” (67). This signifies to Jim that they are “palling up” and he imagines a future where Doyler’s presence will be a welcome physical reminder of “his own streets” and, thus, his community. This physical connection quickly turns spiritual, however, as Jim meditates on his relationship with Doyler and likens it to a vocation. Incited to thought of Doyler by the similarity of the phrase “pal of my heart,” Doyler’s pet name for Jim, and a Dominican retreat prayer for the blessing of a “friend of the heart,” Jim decides that there is “surely something devotional” and possibly “holy even” about his friendship with Doyler (118). Doyler’s repeated call to the “pal of [his] heart” suggests a connection between the boys that is much more spiritual and fulfilling than any Jim receives from the Church or Doyler from his “working man” pals. It recalls as well MacMurrough’s meditation on the “real struggle” Ireland faces in these times. In a string of anti-revivalist sentiments, MacMurrough decides that “the struggle for Irish Ireland is not for truth against untruth” or “good against the bad” but rather “the struggle is for the heart, for its claim to stand in the light and cast a shadow

its own in the sun” (285). We see the fulfillment of this desire at Muglins Island when Jim and Doyler can freely bask in the sun that beats down on a haven they experience without the nationalist rhetoric to which MacMurrough refers. In fact, Jim’s ultimate decision to fight for the nation is grounded entirely in his physical and emotional connection to Doyler. Jim will fight for Ireland because Doyler will be fighting and Doyler is, Jim says, “[his] country.” Considering this conflation of personal and national identification, Valente is quite right in his assertion that the nationalism of Jim and Doyler is nationalism “in a broad sense, valuing membership and participation in an independent community” (61). That community, though involving MacMurrough to some extent, begins for Jim with his attachment to Doyler, an attachment that places them clearly outside the normative community. As Valente argues, the connection between the boys’ courtship and their nationalist involvement suggests a “parallelism between decolonizing and queering, between becoming fully Irish and standing outside the norm” (60-61). For Jim, the link between the boys’ courtship and their participation in the Rising is quite direct. He looks forward to the “grand things coming” not so much because of the nationalist uprising but because of the desire to “fight with your friend beside you” (378). Jim and Doyler are, for each other, the only Ireland worth fighting for; at Muglins Island, they mark the territory that will define their private “nation.”

What follows Jim and Doyler’s triumphant arrival at Muglins Island is an intimate and tender portrayal of the fledgling lovers as they consummate their sexual relationship and explore each other’s bodies as two conquerors surveying their new plot of land. Jim timidly asks Doyler if he will “lie on top of [him]” and share in the experience he desires though he “[doesn’t] know what’s it called” (464). As Doyler’s body joins with his, Jim’s focus on the physicality of their actions—“his body strained the more to meet the body above”—eventually shifts to a mental

claiming of Muglins Island itself as the site of their love, their strength, and their freedom. In this, O'Neill explicitly links the boys' bodily union to the land they have claimed for Ireland. Jim and Doyler are identified now by having "their home" that "no one [can] take" (466). Jim's acceptance on the island of Doyler, and of his own desires, in fact revises his earlier fears about the disabling effects of engaging in such assumed perversion. At the Volunteer rally/garden party, Jim meets Doyler's advances with horror and reflects the power of the institutionally inscribed rhetoric of Irish purity: when Doyler removes his hand from under Jim's kilt, Jim looks away for fear the hand will be "disfigured or discolored some way" from its contact with his genitals (277). Such fear of disfigurement and punishment is absent on the island. Jim and Doyler's claiming of an island home is, of course, worth noting. Valente suggests that the planting of the green flag will "not only turn Muglins Island into an offshore version of Ireland; it will turn [Jim and Doyler's] destination into a beckoning emblem of the 'offshore' nature of Irish identity" (61).

The safe haven the boys create is not within the bounds of the normative Irish nation but rather physically (and imaginatively) outside and beyond it. O'Neill indeed describes the view from Muglins Island as having "no horizon, only a shimmering haze" that "intensifie[s] the sense of boundless expanse" (462). Jim's thoughts knowingly acknowledge that their home is a retreat, it is "in the sea, an island" (466). The aberrant status of this free space parallels as well the history of Muglins Island upon which Doyler bases the planned re-conquest. Muglins Island represents for Doyler the violent history of patriots Gidley and MacKinley, betrayed and murdered "way [back] in the penal days" (191) by the British. Though the British are to blame for the violence the patriots suffered, Doyler implicates the Irish, noting that the men were originally strung up in St. Stephen's Green but moved to the Muglins after complaint from the

“good citizens of Dublin” who “took their promenade in the Green” and found the morbid sight “disagreeable” (191). This image leads, of course, to Jim’s nightmare in which Doyler is chained to the rocks with “an old gander peck[ing] at his eyes. Save it wasn’t his eyes he pecked, but down down down below” (290). Coming just after Doyler’s garden party expulsion, Jim’s dream clearly signals that respectable Irish nationalists are, for those who express unsuitable desires, as menacing as British authorities. Through these two images, Muglins Island thus becomes a dump site for the violated body that reflects imperial violence and also stands as a symbol of shame and disgrace that is offensive to the national community. In this way, we could argue, Jim and Doyler’s liberating sexual consummation becomes rather a reinforcement of the community’s shaming of their homosexuality because this final bodily union takes place in secret rather than in the space of middle-class Dublin. In planting the flag, the boys indeed answer the dead patriots’ call to “Irishmen for vengeance on their murder,” but it is a reclaiming without national consequence and soon to be undermined by Doyler’s own political status as martyr to a cause in which he does not believe. O’Neill’s discussion of the Rising indeed exposes at once its futility and its significance, its falsity and its authenticity. In the Easter Rising, as in the 1798 Rebellion championed by twentieth-century Revivalists, competing strains of Irish nationalism devour and destroy each other as they create the possibility of an Irishness that can support diverse desires for different freedoms.

The Easter Rising of *At Swim, Two Boys* presents in contrast to Yeats’s poem and all falsely homogenizing accounts a rebellion harshly received by the Irish onlookers for whom it is being perpetrated. In O’Neill’s description of the Rising, chaos and confusion are paramount among the Irish people and the republican “soldiers” themselves. Jim and Doyler’s sacrifice of body for the love of each other is in fact set against the more mundane and dispassionate

sacrifice being made in the name of Ireland. Doyler's earlier quip that Patrick Pearse and the Irish Volunteers—dedicated to Gaelic League cultural nationalism—would, in the event of a rising, be at the Abbey Theatre “giving a reading” highlights the inherent difficulty in translating Irish myth into Irish action, Irish desire into Irish success (507). Throughout *At Swim, Two Boys*, O'Neill displays not only the eclipsing of sexual or religious difference but also the prioritizing of revolutionary agendas. Doyler's wariness of Pearse's Volunteers and Father O'Toiler's revivalism reflects his belief that the “Volunteers is in league with the priests and the priests is in league with the bosses and they're all agin the working man” (203). His disgust at Connolly's apparent transformation from socialist leader to nationalist lackey highlights Doyler's dissatisfaction at the possibility for change and suggests throughout the impossibility of Doyler finding the kind of change that will indeed present a new sense of freedom and dignity for him.¹²⁰ Connolly's ultimate betrayal of socialist values is his decision to work in consort with the Volunteers whom Doyler views as a “contamination.” Had the Volunteers been “born Englishmen,” Doyler says, “they'd be all for King and Empire” (416). This strikingly simple complaint reveals Doyler's (and O'Neill's) critique of an empty nationalism that is based solely on an imagined concept of national borders. Doyler knows that swearing an oath to an Irish King (or an Irish priest) will not free the Irish working man.

Though both boys eventually seem to represent a romantic nationalism that embraces just the kind of impossible ideals that characterize Irish revivalism, Doyler's very real skepticism and his experience of debilitating poverty reminds us of the concrete suffering that underlies this rhetorical battle. This tension is perhaps most explicitly portrayed when Doyler first encounters the Citizen Army flag at Liberty Hall: “the plough wasn't at all how he had imagined, something you would have to guess at, like the shapes in the sky, but it was a real plough, a manifest thing,

you might nearly step up to the flag and pull it away to do work in a field” (407). The concrete reality of Liberty Hall captivates Doyler after his experience with the Presentation band and revolutionary ideals based only on mythic Irishness. His meditation on the flag is, of course, ironic in its certainty. While the flag gives a quite literal representation of a plough, it is itself only a representation. Doyler’s experience with Connolly and his growing disillusionment with the Irish Citizen Army reflect the inability of Irish nationalism to maintain differing strains without collapsing in on itself. This tension between nationalist ideals and revolutionary action consumes all discussions of rebellion in the novel. To his aunt Eva—the novel’s lead female insurgent and the most powerful and prominent of its (fictional) rebels—MacMurrough movingly considers the plight of the poor against the grand plans of revolution: “when you see boys without any trousers...and girls walking about in flour-sacks, you wonder...is any of this going to change that. Or is it just repainting the postboxes?” His aunt’s distracted response—“Postboxes?” she said. “Yes, green—an inspired idea”—displays again the erasure of real suffering in the face of nationalist fervor. It also foreshadows the failure of Irish nationalism to ultimately redeem those, like the Doyles, who most fully experience oppression, marginalization (often from fellow countrymen like Mr. Mack), and daily economic suffering (392).

Jim’s experience of the Rising as well suggests an Irish revolutionary force ill-equipped for military success and unable to move beyond trivial devotion to Catholic codes of behavior. Finally embracing the desire to fight for his country—defined, as it is, by his love of Doyler—Jim must beg to “get in” to the Rising, “following [the soldiers] round the outside of the park, calling through the railings his knowledge of semaphore and bandaging and to strip a rifle” (533). When he is finally admitted, Jim is surprised to find that rather than “talking tactics or making bombs,” the men are saying the Rosary. O’Neill’s description of the Rising in fact

alternates between comic unreality and horrific gravity—“one of the lads asked him was he hungry, and he brought a custard pie....That lad was dead now” (533-534). Mr. Mack’s onlooker observations and the confusion amidst the rebels themselves enforce this dichotomy. A rebel officer’s misidentification of de Valera—“Commandant de la Vera holds Boland’s mills”—and general indifference by the “quidnunc” Dublin crowd reflect inadequacy and acquiescence where nationalist rhetoric has promised strength and vengeance. In the grand moment of rebellion, the Irish crowd reflects a narrow-minded need and desire for material comfort—the people are looting in the streets—and quashes its own rebellion for fear of imperial retribution and, it seems, any degree of challenge to authority. That the crowd descends quickly on “some fool of a youngster” who dares voice Rebel support compares little to the “excitable unconcern” MacMurrough and Doyler witness as they survey the scene (543, 549). In *At Swim, Two Boys* the Irish republican Army is indeed born amid “the stupid wonder of these [Irish] people” (549).

O’Neill’s Irish martyrs and heroes navigate an Irish community whose constructed colonial identity and dependence on religious authority foil any attempt at deliverance from either. MacMurrough’s disappointment at the “man-in-the-moon face[s]” of the gawking crowd echoes his aunt Eva’s earlier sentiments and highlights the portrayal of Irish heroes sacrificed to impossible ideals and fighting for an Ireland that itself sacrifices personal freedom. Like her more-emphasized male counterparts, Eva MacMurrough meditates throughout the novel on the character of true Irishness and appropriate forms of Irish nationalism. Her family history of rebellion in fact makes Eva the most storied character of the novel and in a sense the one whose sacrifice is most futile—her family history includes “sieges broken, battles lost, [and] long valiant retreats” (22). “Her tryst,” MacMurrough thinks, “might truly be with history” (219).

Historically, this tryst is destined, then, for failure. Most importantly, Eva's familial history of failed rebellion mirrors both Ireland's inability to rise above its oppressor and its infinite supply of willing rebels. Eva herself "yearn[s] for the grinding of pikes on a stone" and boasts of receiving "one month's detention" for her dedication to the cause (102, 168). Her fervor is unequaled, though, by the respectable Irish who control Irish destiny and reflect an acceptance of British superiority rather than a desire to thwart it. Like O'Neill's other rebels, Eva fights for a country undeserving and undesiring—"one seeks the deliverance of one's country from subjection," she thinks, but "one's country does not wish its deliverance. One's countrymen would settle for a Home Rule that would shame a county council" (222). Eva's plan to change "those minds" and save Ireland despite itself adds her to a list—not lost on *At Swim, Two Boys*—of heroes and martyrs belatedly championed by the Irish people and significant only as victims of the cause.

Like those now mythologized rebels, Eva is herself defined by romantic if somewhat unrealistic ideals. She too sees the Irish people as defined through idealized rhetoric of rural simplicity and spiritual exceptionality in need of deliverance from the evil Empire. There is, she believes, a "spirit in [the Irish] hills which the foreigner had never touched. . . . It was deep in the land. In the mist it hung, it seeped below in the suck of turf" (472). In this same moment of meditation—that comes, importantly, during her brief reprieve from jail to attend Easter Mass—Eva "sees" Ireland in the altar boy as she also views Ireland as a "serving lad." While Eva's rationality in the face of Father O'Toiler's superficiality has heretofore reflected a degree of reality in her brand of nationalism, in her final moments of imprisoned despair Eva's dreams of revolution take on a typically revivalist and idealist character. Even she, bearer of arms and woman of action, falls back on established rhetoric of Irish insurrection that upholds martyrdom

as an end in itself. As she silently praises “this serving lad, so dazzling he stood...as they of the Fianna of old,” she as well projects his death in a Rising not as any had hoped: “not the opened tomb but the cross on the hill. He would go out, this young Ireland, he and a necessary few...he would offer his life, by the overwhelming sword to die: a ravishment really: and Irishmen everywhere would shake for shame” (473, 475). Eva’s realization comes, of course, after the imprisonment of Roger Casement for whom she has great affection though he, like Parnell, remains an “uncrowned King” because of Ireland’s inability to seek freedom outside particular moral constraints. Eva’s pathetic rather than triumphant death suggests that the Irish people she hoped to convert are not yet ready to embrace their own freedom. Ireland is rather still a “serving lad” anxious to please both Church and King. We see in the novel’s rare moments of imperial perspective the consequences of this self-sacrificing model of colonial submission. At Dublin Castle, Mr. Mack observes two “splendid officers of the crown” discussing rumors of an upcoming rebellion:

“Oh it won’t come to shooting people. And if it does, we can leave that safely to the Irish. You surely know the one thing they hate more than us English.”
...“It’s an Irishman with the pluck to stand up to us.” (429)

At Swim, Two Boys indeed suggests in its portrayal of the Rising’s onlookers an evident apathy toward the aspirations so many of its heroes profess. Despite Eva’s final musings, the Easter Rising does not align with romantic visions of nationalist triumph. The martyrdom of Doyler at the moment he and Jim are reunited suggests that certain freedoms will not be obtained by even the most effective colonial rebellion. The Rising’s reality of bloodshed and bodily sacrifice does, however, suggest an unquenchable desire for freedom that goes beyond abstract ideals of Irishness and the reclaiming of Irish culture.

In this fictional representation of the rising, O'Neill quite explicitly reinserts the physical and the human into a rising retroactively mythologized by Irish nationalists. We are told earlier that Doyler's uniform had to be resewn and fitted because "it had belonged to another man who had died or dropped out" (412). O'Neill consistently reminds us of an excess of frustration and sacrifice on the part of Irish rebels throughout history. MacMurrough's visit to the military hospital ward in Dublin Castle—two days before the Rising—revisits the novel's equal preoccupation with the Irish who are disabled in the fight for Empire, the "collection of war-wounded" with "different lengths of leg that might be cut off" and "tucks in armless tunics" (447). Unlike Yeats's martyrs whose "vivid faces" fade into abstraction after the Rising, O'Neill's murdered hero returns in all his bodily vivacity to haunt his living lover's dreams. Doyler indeed dies of an "excess of love," shot down while running to his lover and dying in his lover's arms. In *At Swim, Two Boys*, the dead eternally walk. Politically free from colonial constraints, the Irish nationalists are explicitly embodied in death with a very real presence that connects to the living. The violence of colonialism and the nationalism it creates thus remains beyond death in the creation of a bodily immortality that is hauntingly restless. Along with the ghostly walking of the martyred Doyler, we must consider the fevered walking of Jim's brother Gordie, also a victim of violence but killed on the Western Front rather than in the Home Rising. As an Irish Volunteer pressed into colonial service, Gordie in a sense represents those Irish fighting *for* the British as Doyler fights against them. Doyler's martyrdom does create in Jim a hatred of the English, which Jim previously lacked, and a national fanaticism we could liken to that which followed the martyrdom of the Easter rebels. Jim's ultimate position as republican rebel against the Free State Army—the novel projects Jim's death as well—leaves us with an image quite fitting to the novel's tensions: from a fight against Empire, the Irish indeed end in a

fight against themselves. Thus, the identical position Doyler and Gordie inhabit after death in Jim's dreams suggests the disabled Irish body as reflective of a tradition of blood sacrifice, useless martyrdom and historical violence—both imperial and national.

Chapter 5

Deane/MacLaverty: Familial Division in a Divided Ireland

Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* fill with betrayal, shame, and secrecy tales that present through their marked differences the nuanced struggle of Catholic Irish identification in mid-twentieth-century Northern Ireland.¹²¹ Utilizing different environments within the Northern Ireland territory—Deane focusing exclusively on the almost entirely Catholic Derry to MacLaverty's largely Protestant Belfast outskirts—these contemporary Irish authors present strikingly different meditations on the role of compassion and pity in a fight so ruled by ideological entrenchment. Despite these variations, though, both emphasize the overpowering and debilitating aura of anxiety and fear produced in the name of and as a result of the fight for a united Irish Republic. The centrality of secrecy and shame in these works attests to the level of mental and emotional damage inflicted by a nation divided against its own people in which neighbors and family members must alternately fight, defend, and inform on each other. The prevalence of physically disabling afflictions in these texts as well suggests a link between physical suffering and the suppression of religious and national belonging. Cal, MacLaverty's eponymous anti-hero, rightly wonders "how many people [have] cracked up like [his father] as a result of the troubles" (113). Deane's account of warring families and secret feuds suggests the answer is many and that the toll of secrecy and shame is the peace of the Irish spirit.

As *Reading in the Dark* exposes the frighteningly suffocating atmosphere of British rule in a Catholic subsection of Northern Ireland, it as well suggests that cross "cultural" identification is possible and that unrealistically staunch narratives of national belonging impede

rather than develop a strong sense of self-worth in the Irish people. In a telling and often overlooked scene of empathy and compassion in Northern Ireland, the unnamed young narrator privately contemplates the complexity of sympathetic identification amidst sectarian politics and unwavering ideologies. In a chapter entitled “Accident,” we receive a seemingly plot-irrelevant vignette—not uncommon to the novel’s structure—about a boy named Rory who is accidentally crushed and killed by a reversing lorry. Observing an anguished policeman, the narrator feels pangs of sympathy—the policeman’s “distress reached [him], airborne, like a smell...and, with it, pity for the man” (10-11). His instinctual empathy is quickly replaced by the feelings of guilt and shame we see him so often combating—“this seemed wrong; everyone hated the police, told us to stay away from them, that they were a bad lot. So I said nothing” (11). The boy is equally disturbed by his lack of feeling for Rory’s mother and for the lorry driver, both whom he personally knows and with whom he shares a Catholic Irish cultural identity. The boy’s guilt is later assuaged when he hears the narrative of Rory’s death being falsified to fuel republican rhetoric. When a school pal claims that Rory was run over uncaringly by a policeman, the boy’s empathy for the policeman seems further justified as does a new “sorrow for Rory’s mother.” This belated sympathy seems directed not at the loss of her son but at the distortion of his memory for political use. With this very short tale, Deane thus highlights the difficulty of growing up Catholic under watchful British and Protestant eyes and the difficulty of growing up at all under the constant pressure to align one’s feelings with acceptable political positions.

Warring feelings of compassion and guilt abound in Deane’s and MacLaverty’s narratives as they attempt to bridge the divides that define Northern Ireland’s very existence. The prematurely mature attitude of Deane’s young narrator returns at the novel’s close, reflected in his father’s end-of-life compassion for the father of a British soldier who has been shot by the

IRA. “Poor man,” says the boy’s father. “I feel for him. Even if his son was one of those” (245). Two fathers’ ability to drink tea, shake hands, and calmly discuss political action signifies as the novel ends that a common humanity may in some way or at some times displace partisan division. It signals an inter-national sense of compassion born not of guilt at one’s own actions but of shame at the necessary existence of violent discord in the colony of Northern Ireland. Despite the limited worldview of Catholic-dominated Derry, Deane’s characters present in this compassionate discourse an Irish colony whose tragic fate engulfs colonizer and colonized, Protestant and Catholic alike. Ironically, in its more diverse cast of characters and more diverse Belfast setting, *Cal* presents a rather limited view of inter-cultural identification as it often intones, albeit in more subtle forms, the nationalist rhetoric it purports to critique.

Like Deane’s narrator, Cal repeatedly encounters sectarian violence that forms the backdrop of his Northern Ireland environment. His ultimate conclusion that “it is the people of Ulster who [are] heroic” because they exist “caught between the jaws of two opposing ideals” (83) suggests a less partisan brand of compassion than the novel generally evokes. Unlike Deane’s narrator, Cal seems unable to feel sympathy for those who do not share his republican ambitions. Marcella, the widowed wife of an RUC policeman in whose murder Cal takes part, shares Cal’s Catholicism and his surprising lack of pity for the Protestant victims of IRA attacks. His inward-focused guilt leaves no room for outward sympathy, a reality Cal himself encounters whenever faced with the attack wounds of Mr. Morton, Marcella’s father-in-law who was critically injured in but survived the attack on her husband. When he hears the old man’s “wet and bubbling” coughs, Cal “trie[s] to block off his sense of hearing by staring intensely at the wall” and thinks of “going out himself to get away from the sound” (54). Marcella likewise admits that she “can’t stand to hear Grandad coughing” and bemoans her presumed

responsibility to the Mortons—her Protestant in-laws—after her husband’s murder (107-8). In the end, though *Cal* harshly critiques militant extremism of any brand, including and especially the IRA in Northern Ireland, Cal’s sympathy toward Marcella and his redemptive journey reinforce the belief in a morally superior Catholic Ireland tragically disabled by continued British imperialism. From differing perspectives, Deane and MacLaverty both expose the emotionally and mentally crippling force of the imperial presence in Northern Ireland. Their narratives reveal that colonial life in mid-twentieth-century Northern Ireland maintains, long after the celebrated independence of the Republic, a necessary dependence on secrecy and duplicity that prevents both national freedom and individual development.

Cal’s Weak Stomach (and Other Signs of Irish Catholic Moral Superiority)

Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal*, a late-twentieth-century examination of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, charts the redemptive journey of a young man who unwillingly—if not unwittingly—becomes party to the murder of Robert Morton, an RUC policeman allegedly targeted for planting a gun on “two totally innocent...Catholic lads from the town.” Cal’s self-assuring contention that he is “just driving” (84) while his pal Crilly perpetrates the actual crime forms the basis for his year-long struggle with his role in the murder and his inability to properly assuage his guilt. In the year after the murder, Cal struggles to find work, encounters what we assume to be routine heckling and beatings from Protestant youths in his neighborhood, and is ultimately burned out of the home he and his father Shamie share. As Stephen Watt asserts in “The Politics of Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal*,” in forcing them to the streets, the firebombing of Cal and Shamie’s house “dramatically reconfirm[s] the fragility of the membrane dividing

private and public worlds.”¹²² As a novel, *Cal* in fact repeatedly performs this collusion of public and private concerns, relating the individual fear that Cal and Shamie face to their seemingly necessary involvement in the IRA and the personal devastation that public partisan conflict brings. In this merging of public and private strife, MacLaverty indeed suggests that colonial rule and the attendant sectarian terror in Northern Ireland destroys and weakens the Irish community as it prevents political Irish freedom. Despite its criticisms of the IRA, MacLaverty’s narrative as well replicates an idealized view of Irishness that complicates his seeming critique of extreme nationalist ideals. That Cal eventually falls in love with Marcella Morton, the murdered man’s widow, and begins living and working on the murdered man’s family farm complicates his spiritual struggle as it ironically distances him from the anti-Catholic surveillance he encounters in his own Protestant-dominated town. The novel’s focus on Cal’s relationship with Marcella, a fellow Catholic, and Cal’s constant idealizing of this union redirects Cal’s guilt from the murder of Robert Morton to the deception of his wife, the ultimately more deserving character because she is Catholic and not complicit in the oppression of Cal’s people. Though Marcella identifies herself largely by her Italian roots—in fact, she is just back from a trip to Rome, center of international Catholicism—she notes that “the Italians are very like the Irish” in their focus on “friendliness, the religion thing, [and] the family” and not like “the English [who] are cold fish” (118). In Cal’s environment, defined by sectarian violence, that Marcella is Catholic essentially makes her more Irish than the Irish (but wealthy and Protestant) Mortons.

While the novel indeed focuses on Cal’s debilitating guilt that results from Robert Morton’s murder, it as well charts Cal’s spiritual regeneration which is affected by his closeness to Marcella and thus complicates our understanding of Cal’s sympathies. The Mortons seem to

embody both problem and solution for Cal, they whose existence haunts and can save him. Watt rightly notes that the Morton's farm is Cal's "temporary escape from the panoptic discipline that regulates life in Northern towns" (134). His life on the Morton farm in fact brings many benefits—his position there validates him to anti-Catholic workers, his remote and unexpected location hides him from the IRA ex-pals looking to enlist his help and kill him should he refuse, and his physical closeness to Marcella enables the growth of their emotional and ultimately sexual relationship. In "Rivalry, Confession, and Healing in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*," Jeanette Shumaker suggests that Cal's "role of Catholic subservience to Protestant landholders" like the Mortons contributes to the penance he enacts by laboring on the farm.¹²³ Such a reading gives Cal a little too much credit, though. His position on the Morton farm enables his closeness with Marcella and certainly does not reflect a deep respect for the Mortons and their troubles. He hides out in the Mortons' cottage to escape punishment—by both the RUC and the IRA—and uses Mrs. Morton's hospitality to forge a relationship with her murdered son's wife. As Cal appropriates the cottage space, we encounter visions of the idealized Irish countryside that begin to soothe Cal's anxiety.

While I agree with Watt that in *Cal* "history competes with mythology" and that the novel certainly does not offer a wholesale romanticization of nationalist poetics and politics, it is perhaps too far to say that offering an "idealization of pastoral Ireland" is "exactly what [the novel] does not do" (135). As Cal's relationship with Marcella develops, so too does their isolation from society increase. Though they occasionally meet at the library and more regularly—and importantly—at Mass on Sundays, Cal and Marcella transform the cottage into a private space that allows their intimacy to unfold. Rather than completely disavowing romantic national fictions, MacLaverty's use of the pastoral motif in *Cal* perhaps suggests more critically

the dominance of such nationalist narratives and their allure despite their falsity. Watt rightly notes that Cal and MacLaverty both “evince concern about the costs of sustaining fictions of peasant cottages and a romantic Ireland,” but Cal clings to these fictions more strongly than Watt allows. Repeatedly, MacLaverty references Cal’s connection to the land and the livestock. The “noise of the beasts [is] a comfort to him,” MacLaverty writes. “They snuffled and breathed, chewed and ground their teeth. One would occasionally low for no reason at all” (81). Country life is, for Cal, alive with sounds and smells that counter the bloodiness and impersonality of the city and, more specifically, the abattoir where cattle are slaughtered with an ease and indifference Cal cannot accept. Cal finds the “reek of living cattle much more acceptable than the smell of the abattoir and,” in fact, “after a while gr[ows] to like it. The animals had a soft milky smell on their breath” and Cal finds “the dung smell that hung around them...not unpleasant” (68). Even more significant is Cal’s assertion that to Belfast’s look of “a growing factory” he prefers “the look of Donegal where nothing [industrial] grows. Beaches, bogs and mountains” (117). Cal’s previous meditation on the experience of freedom he achieves from crossing the Border into “the real Ireland...out from under the weight and darkness of Protestant Ulster” (39) connects the pastoral purity of Donegal, the “real Ireland,” to a freedom Cal desires but cannot experience in the North.

MacLaverty’s focus on constraint and emotional imprisonment in Northern Ireland echoes postcolonial anxieties concerning individual development against the backdrop of artificial imperial and national narratives. In Cal’s still-colonial environment, inevitable failure and forced identification consistently threaten his ability to make choices that match his personal desires. Though he too quickly disavows MacLaverty’s use of national rhetoric, Watt is certainly right to highlight *Cal*’s emphasis on “the tension between individual choice and the

power of ideological apparatuses to determine such choice well in advance” (138). Cal’s options indeed exist “within a narrowly circumscribed ambit of possibility” (138). Importantly, we learn that his initial involvement with the IRA and consequent role in Robert Morton’s murder result from his father Shamie’s decision to accept IRA help in defending his home. Unlike his republican literary counterparts, Cal must navigate and attempt to integrate the narratives he encounters via British authority, Church teaching, nationalist ideals, and extreme IRA fanaticism. As he and Marcella become more intimate, we ultimately find that their shared bond is the bondage they feel because of these scripts.¹²⁴ Cal’s justification of his actions and the possibility of Marcella’s forgiveness rest on Cal’s lack of control. In the novel’s final pages, we see that Cal’s desire to be “open and honest with [Marcella]” means telling her “how the events of his life were never what he wanted, how he seemed unable to influence what was going on around him” (152). As Cal’s self-proclaimed powerlessness still hovers, Marcella echoes this very sentiment.

Marcella’s relationship with the Mortons, her murdered husband’s Protestant family, indeed mirrors the oppressive “marriage” of Britain and Ireland as it has long been characterized in historical and literary discourse. Marcella’s belief that the Mortons occasionally hire Catholics simply to show their own superior morality amidst rampant anti-Catholic prejudice reinforces their position of control to her own feelings of imprisonment. MacLaverty’s portrayal of Mrs. Morton’s polite but unsympathetic courtesy alongside Marcella’s tender compassion for Cal as well reminds us that sectarian division in Northern Ireland allows only for apparent civility rather than actual acceptance. Her responsibility to the Mortons, a burden she resents, prevents her from choosing a life that allows real healing and liberation because their narrative of her marriage still competes with the reality she experienced. Marcella wants desperately to leave

the Mortons' farm and take control of her own life, but at each attempt "something comes up and [Mrs. Morton] persuades [her] to stay on" (153). In this final moment of intimacy and empathy, Cal and Marcella's meditation on emotional imprisonment and underdevelopment reflects Irish paralysis and powerlessness in Northern Ireland. Both victims of colonial war, Cal and Marcella represent the hard-working, rural, Irish Catholics oppressed by the surveillance and authority of wealthy Protestants and the terrorizing extremism of IRA Catholics. In fact, contrary to Julian Moynahan's claim that in MacLaverty's writing "the victim should be encouraged to blame himself for what has been inflicted on him," in *Cal* it seems that often everyone but Cal is to blame for his involvement in Robert Morton's murder and his inability to escape the guilt that results.¹²⁵ Cal's repeated feelings of sickness and the physically traumatizing effects of this burden increase our awareness that the environment of Northern Ireland paralyzes and disempowers Cal.

As we have seen them do in other colonial and postcolonial Irish literature of the twentieth century, bodily discomfort and disease appear in *Cal* to suggest both inadequate Irish living conditions and debilitating political strife. In *Cal*, MacLaverty uses Cal's body to as well reflect a sense of moral superiority that ultimately justifies Cal despite his involvement in Robert Morton's murder. From the novel's first pages, MacLaverty defines Cal by a "weak stomach" that makes him unable to support himself by working in the abattoir and, we eventually find, unable to "stomach" the horrors of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. The novel's first twenty pages yield six references to Cal's stomach—his stomach is "rigid with the ache of want," it "tighten[s] at the thought" of violence, and it has "felt like a washboard over the past year" (7, 11, 20). In his insightful analysis of blood sacrifice and animality in *Cal*, Peter Mahon notes that *Cal*'s opening scene on the abattoir's killing floor "neatly emphasizes the novel's

preoccupation with the complex network of relations that bind blood, violence and religion together.”¹²⁶ Though Mahon is quite right that Cal becomes himself a sacrificial victim for the political strife of which he is part, Cal’s position in the opening scene—“at the back gateway of the abattoir,” looking for his father but “not want[ing] to venture in” (7)—immediately emphasizes his willful distancing from the violence and bloodshed that characterize life in Northern Ireland. Upon leaving the abattoir, Cal feels “almost immediately...the muscles of his stomach relax” (8). References to the tightening and relaxing of Cal’s stomach continue throughout the novel as MacLaverty strengthens the link between sectarian violence and Cal’s physical discomfort. His father Shamie’s assertion that Cal should never have stopped working at the abattoir and that he would have “got[ten] used to” the nauseating smell reflects a sense of reluctant acceptance and desensitization necessary for survival in Cal and Shamie’s environment. Cal’s refusal to accept these terms results, we see immediately, in a lack of material comfort because he cannot stomach work in the abattoir. His inability to cast off conscientious objections to IRA attacks as well results in his ultimate demonization amongst his nationalist pals and makes him unfit for inclusion in the only segment of his community that does not spurn his Catholicism.

As the novel charts Cal’s journey toward redemption for his crime against Robert Morton, *Cal* reminds us with repeated references to physical and mental illness that community division in Northern Ireland makes sufficient redemption nearly impossible. Expected allegiances haunt Cal as he attempts to confess his role in Robert Morton’s murder without losing Marcella’s sympathy and attempts to break his ties with the IRA without undermining his desires for a united Ireland. That Shamie suggests getting used to the nauseating environment in which they can find work—and, similarly, does not take Cal’s suggestion that they move away

from their Protestant neighborhood despite escalating danger—signals an acceptance of their predicament that proves unsustainable after their house is firebombed and Shamie loses both his home and, essentially, his son. Shamie is in fact the novel's most sympathetic character in that he truly epitomizes the hard-working Irish Catholic who tries, despite imperial occupation and violent threats, to support his family and respect his environment. Shamie's participation in IRA plotting is affected innocently, almost accidentally, and without real desire to cause trouble. Shamie willfully resists British rule only by "snapp[ing] [the tv] off without looking at it" when the national anthem comes on over the Queen's picture (48). Shamie's desire to shuffle Cal away to his Aunt Betty's house to avoid sectarian violence and his refusal to laugh when Cal describes his fight with the Protestant youths demonstrate both Shamie's understanding of their predicament and his submissive acceptance of it. Shamie ends up in the asylum at Gransha where he is subjected to horrifying and disabling electrical shock treatments but where he also can finally escape the burden of negotiating his son's safety. Through Shamie's representation of the Irish Catholic "everyman," MacLaverty thus suggests imprisonment and stunted futures not only for those, like Crilly, who willfully exact retribution for imperial abuses, and those, like Cal, who refuse to accept their inferior status, but also for those, like Shamie, who hope only for peace of mind and a sense of personal worth. Cal and Shamie's discussion of mental health in their community confirms that the tension and hopelessness of Northern Ireland's ideological war has made fruition and comfort impossible for the average person. Shamie suspects a doctor will tell him to "snap out of" his lethargic state. "Say you're depressed," Cal suggests. Shamie insightfully asks, "Who isn't, these days" (112). Shamie's incarceration in the asylum confirms Cal's suspicions that controlling one's own fate is not possible for the politically disempowered.

Cal's sickness, of a similar but more clearly-delineated sort, as well highlights Catholic powerlessness in Northern Ireland as it also emphasizes the permanently scarring effects of sectarian violence and colonial occupation. MacLaverty intricately connects Cal's stomach pain to the night of Robert Morton's murder, thus allowing us to track his sense of guilt by, so to speak, his "gut reaction" to the experiences we now witness. His initial contact with Marcella revives the sense of sickness he relates to the night of her husband's attack—he feels he could "bounce marbles off" his stomach (16) when he first sees her and his insides go "to water" when she speaks to him early on in their friendship (71). Though she is alluring in her beauty and tenderness, Marcella clearly brings to Cal's mind IRA violence and the trauma its victims experience. His vision of her is commonly obscured by flashes of terrifying postures—in the library he tries to make a permanent memory of Marcella but remembers two women Crilly has robbed "sprawled face down on the floor" (71). When he and Marcella have sex, sounds and images of her husband's murder inundate Cal's senses—he hears "the incessant barking of the dogs" and sees "the sudden soiling of the wallpaper" behind her husband as he is killed (138). Cal's memory of the murder, exposed always in flashes of overwhelming physical sensation, suggests an inability to fully understand or grasp his role in the atrocity. It seems actually to imply that Cal's experience of the murder is as traumatic as the Mortons', a suggestion that ultimately justifies his behavior. The night of the murder, though "Cal's stomach [goes] rigid" at the very mention of the plan and, after, he feels "physically sick" as he clutches the sink, MacLaverty notes that Cal "did not vomit" (88). Cal's intermittent nausea and year-long battle with tightening stomach muscles rather suggest that he is still waiting to rid himself of the sickness the murder induced. It is interesting then, when a mine explodes at the Morton farm, that Cal vomits twice after seeing "half a cow—udders, hindquarters with muscles red-raw and

still jiggling” (120-1). This displacement confirms Cal’s horror in the face of violence and suggests his unconscious refusal to recognize Robert Morton as a true victim.

Cal’s status as victim to historical and political forces is confirmed early in the novel when he bemoans his and his father’s lack of community. Their immediate environment is itself oppressive because of rampant imperial symbolism—Cal walks with downcast eyes, avoiding the unbearable sight of “the flutter of Union Jacks.” When the novel opens, Cal’s usually submissive posture is also foiled as “the kerbstones had been painted alternating red, white and blue.” Cal feels this patriotic affront is directed personally at him and his father because they are the only Catholics in their block. Though these symbolic gestures annoy Cal, he is most disturbed by the “feeling of community” the Protestants create and the resultant isolation of his family (9).¹²⁷ As it signals the threatening environment Cal must navigate, he and his father’s exclusion from the community also suggests the inability for them to develop a national identification that complements their religious and political beliefs. Cal’s loneliness even more importantly highlights his refusal to accept community among Catholics whose political extremism disturbs him. In *Cal*, MacLaverty complicates the Catholic-Protestant divide by disaligning Cal’s Catholicism with Crilly’s overtly national enthusiasm. While the IRA leader Skeffington’s remark that Cal must “think of the issues, not the people” at first seems a reasonable republican justification for rebellion (24), Cal’s experience suggests that the issues are as complicated as the personal allegiances, a reality Crilly seems incapable of understanding. Crilly’s mocking indifference to the concerns of a woman he holds up at gunpoint—“as if it made any difference which side was robbing her” (62)—neatly epitomizes the necessarily violent and confusing environment of Northern Ireland. Skeffington’s admission that “it wasn’t like 1916 in 1916” reinforces the need for political rebellion that is more common and less dramatic.

Like Shamie's belief that "the baddies" would die because Catholic Ireland has right on its side, the romanticized narrative of the 1916 Rising contributes to an idealized version of nation rebellion that does not account for the communal suffering and terror that result. In desiring to sever ties with the IRA, Cal is, according to Crilly, "helping to keep the Brits here" (65). The IRA's qualifications for national inclusion—"if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem"—makes communal support even more difficult for Catholics like Cal and Shamie who share a sense of disdain for imperial rule but a sense of sympathy for the people whose lives are affected by political issues (66). Crilly's and Skeffington's extremism contributes to Cal's crucial lack of community which leads him ultimately to identify with Marcella. That they are both Catholic aligns them in a spiritual community we see reflected most in Cal's final gift to her, a portrait of the Crucifixion Marcella has previously described as her favorite Catholic icon. The physicality and bloodiness of the image—the flesh "diseased with sores from the knotted scourges, the mouth open and gasping for breath"—recalls a particularly Catholic emphasis on suffering, guilt, and penance.

Cal intervenes in the discussion of militant extremism by highlighting not the necessity for violent rebellion but rather the consequences of blood sacrifice amid competing scripts of acceptable Irishness. As Cal struggles to recover from his role in Robert Morton's murder, we have the sense that he has done his time with the IRA and now deserves reprieve from his role of militant national. Cal's overwhelming guilt suggests that IRA extremism debilitates rather than strengthens the Irish people. At the same time that it undermines the romantic notion of Cuchulain-like Irish masculinity, Cal's spiritual struggle validates his position as morally superior to the Orangemen he encounters and the IRA combatants he disavows. Like his weekly Mass attendance and remembrances of saying the rosary nightly as a child, Cal's guilt in a way

validates his action by suggesting a moral Irish Catholic superiority deadened by colonial rule and the decolonizing fight. Cal in fact becomes an informer because it is the right thing to do—his spiritual journey in the end overshadows his political beliefs and he betrays his countrymen rather than see more violence in a town already traumatized. By exposing rather than participating in this crucial IRA revolt, Cal exposes the disparity between rhetorical calls for Irish blood and the real-life sectarian violence that has erupted in Northern Ireland. His desire to cleanse himself by preventing more bloodshed directly contradicts Pearse's assertion that "the heart of Ireland would be refreshed by the red wine of the battlefields, that Ireland needed its bloody sacrifice." Earlier in the novel, Cal had read Pearse's exhortation and immediately "closed the book and...moved to the fiction section" (73). Now, Cal enacts this same skirting of national rhetoric by following his own belief that the heart of Ireland cannot endure another bombing. Cal's understanding of nationalist unrest but refusal to partake in reactionary violence sets him apart from Crilly and, as importantly, from Dunlop, the novel's representative Orangeman who believes that "Hitler had the right idea" though the "wrong cause." Dunlop's plan to kill two IRA prisoners every time an RUC policeman is shot reflects a desire to enact vengeance by further bloodshed and redirects blame from Cal, whose guilt we sympathize with, to a stubborn Protestant sect that would "die rather than live under the yoke of Roman Catholicism." Dunlop's final suggestion that extremist Loyalists deserve more sympathy because their violence is only reactionary presents the sobering reality of imperial rule in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, Dunlop's finality and assertiveness force Cal into a silence that confirms Irish Catholic superiority in an environment of physical and political impotence.

By the novel's end, Cal's stomach-tightening anxiety has slightly lessened, but his sense of self-worth has diminished as well. Cal, MacLavery tells us, "was just sick of himself" (134).

Cal's redemption—or rather his final sense of relief at being exposed—relies on a particularly Catholic sense of guilt, confession, and spiritual poverty. Throughout the novel, MacLaverty mingles religious guilt with bodily suffering to reflect a suffering Irish Catholic community pained not only by physical suffering but by a dedication to the ideal of spiritual purity. As Cal's stomach pain clearly stems from the anxiety surrounding his role in Robert Morton's murder, Cal's general sense of sickness mirrors the spiritual guilt he feels. That Cal identifies this physical scarring in Biblical terms reminds us that Cal's emotional development and sense of self-worth depend on his inclusion within the bounds of proper Catholic morality. That Cal "hadn't been to confession for over a year"—that is, since the murder—"and never would go again" confirms that the murder has also damaged his spiritual identity and prevented his official communion with the Church (39). Though MacLaverty does not dwell on Cal's relationship with the Church post-murder, Cal's meditation on religious power assures us that the Church's role in his identity formation is large. Like many young Irish characters, Cal reveres and fears iconic Catholic figures—he is afraid both that "the devil would come to him" and, "even worse," that when he "did something good Our Lady would appear to him" (49).

These fears reflect Cal's belief in Church teaching as they recall the overwhelming power of Catholic rhetoric to subdue and impede spiritual development. Cal views his sin as a "brand stamped in blood in the middle of his forehead" (89) and fears that the "ugliness of what he had done showed in his face" (124). MacLaverty's clear reference here to the mark of Cain reaffirms Cal's tendency to judge himself by Biblical standards and reflects his position outside any acceptable community. The murder indeed casts Cal out of several states of innocence—he becomes forever implicated in the reality of sectarian violence he and his father have tried previously to ignore. MacLaverty's use of the Cain motif of course also highlights the brotherly

violence and familial division that haunt both Northern Ireland in general and Irish Catholics more specifically. In *Cal*, we witness an Ireland divided against itself and an Irish Catholic republican force threatening and terrorizing to its own less extremist supporters. In juxtaposing Cal's guilt with Crilly's and Skeffington's indifference to their victims, MacLaverty also critiques the IRA's use of religious rhetoric to justify its crimes. Cal's remorse thus identifies him as a true Irish victim. His seemingly accidental or inevitable role in Robert Morton's murder as well reflects an Irish community forever scarred by imperial violence and unable to fully cleanse itself of this stain. The novel's consistent commentary on Cal's bodily habits reflects this inability to properly maintain a community amidst crisis—Cal is able, occasionally, to have a proper bath and feel “clean on the outside” (58), but his spiritual “ugliness” and dirtiness cannot be purged. After bathing, Cal examines the wounds inflicted by a group of Protestant youths who make trouble in his neighborhood. He notices “the progress of his bruises and [sees] them turn from blue-black to a jaundiced yellow” as they begin to heal (56). The bruises appear, as does Cal, to be healing, but Cal's final thoughts—that he is about to be “beat[en] to within an inch of his life” (154)—remind us that fresh wounds will always take their place on Cal and on Ireland's national body.

Familial Breakdown, Blood Feuds, and “becoming strange” in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*

Discussing O'Connell's and Parnell's use of Irish language in their crafting of Irish national character, Seamus Deane says in his critical work *Strange Country* that the two leaders “were, in effect, attempting in variant ways to rewrite Irish history as a series of pasts that were to be escaped from or returned to, something to grow out of or to grow back into, something to

be erased or something to be revived.”¹²⁸ In this eloquent portrait of fledgling nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, Deane evokes an Ireland fashioning from myth and memory a national image to combat imperial rhetoric that has previously defined, degraded, and disabled its people. His own use of language here suggests a process as circular as it is linear, as infinite as it is necessarily definitive. It reminds us, despite nineteenth and twentieth-century narratives of rural Irish purity and Irish Catholic exceptionalism, that national narratives, like the nation itself, contain—and often attempt to conceal—competing voices, shameful histories, and supposedly deviant strains. In linking this image of receding, returning, and resurrected pasts to Ireland’s most famous political figures, Deane poignantly highlights the deliberately crafted nature of national character and the necessary privileging of certain scripts over others for inclusion in this definitive tale. His use of O’Connell alongside Parnell is particularly ironic as it inevitably invokes both O’Connell’s extreme Catholic nationalism and the Catholic provincialism that dethroned and shamed Parnell, relegating his political fall to the “to be erased” archives of Irish history because of its morally suspicious implications.¹²⁹ Deane’s critical emphasis here on the necessary remembering, forgetting, erasing, and reviving that attends national development highlights the difficulty of forging a unified national identity as it points to the thematic concerns with narrative wholeness and familial identification we encounter in his fictional writing. Deane’s own words from *Strange Country*—“a series of pasts that were to be escaped from or returned to”—in fact describe the familial history of *Reading in the Dark* with a haunting accuracy. In *Reading in the Dark*, his fictional critique of imperial persecution and Irish master narratives, Deane presents in miniature, personal, familial form the disabling consequences of selective historical memory and of competing scripts of acceptable Irishness. As it addresses the political climate of mid-twentieth-century Northern Ireland, Deane’s novel as well views the

North as the missing piece to an Irish nation arbitrarily and senselessly dismembered.

Emphasizing physical illness, death, and stagnation alongside confusing historical scripts and ambiguous familial history, *Reading in the Dark* reads post-partition Ireland as a national body forever maimed and a national family always incomplete.

In keeping with the *bildungsroman* tradition, Deane presents in *Reading in the Dark* a protagonist whose development certainly reflects the development of a national consciousness still unraveling a history of conflict and debating standards of national acceptance. Indeed, his nation is as yet uncreated—or, rather, it has been formed on the other side of an imaginary border over which he can cross only for moments at a time. While Tom Herron is partially right to conclude that *Reading in the Dark* is “a sort of disappointed *bildungsroman*” because “the emotional and mythological resources of Donegal are depleted”¹³⁰ and the boy is unable to find fulfillment in an identification with the Irish Republic, this characterization is perhaps a bit premature. The boy’s ultimate frustration and his wearied acceptance of looming national conflict—the novel ends amidst rising political strife between republican and imperial forces—indeed suggest that, despite *his* disappointment, his subjective state in fact mirrors that of the nation. In finally accepting the discontinuities and silences of his own family history, the narrator embraces an Irishness replete with competing narratives and unsettling forces. Like his family—forced into silence and fractured by their experience of imperial and national conflict—Irish nationalism forges ahead with a fight whose complicated history and at times misdirected violence may derail its own development. This national complexity is reflected in the unnamed protagonist of *Reading in the Dark*, a young boy mired in the depths of a familial history that is always uncertain. The novel’s opening line confirms its only locatable clarity: “on the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence” (3). This silence lives, we see, on the stairs, an in-between space

on which the “unhappy” ghosts of the past revisit the boy’s weary mother (3). Silence remains throughout the novel one of few certainties in the boy’s otherwise inscrutable family history. As Stephen Regan notes, the novel has “no single linear narrative, but instead a proliferation of narrative possibilities that have to do with the absence of any secure knowledge.”¹³¹ Like the silence of the staircase—a silence the boy’s mother so deftly controls and is eventually consumed by—the competing narratives that the boy ultimately uncovers impede any unified understanding of his own familial history and reflect Ireland’s inability to forge a national identity while splintered by “familial” division.

Through the narrator’s quest to uncover his family’s secret pasts, Deane suggests that the process of decolonization, partition, and nation-building has spawned debilitating guilt, humiliation and shame for the Irish people. The boy, in his innocence, represents those coming of age in a time and place shrouded by a new kind of oppression and uncertainty. In a chapter entitled “Going to the Pictures,” Deane presents a further fictionalized and miniaturized version of Irish-Irish national conflict to demonstrate the boy’s naïveté and the emotionally crippling consequences of destruction at the hands of trusted authority. As the “thriller” comes to a close, the boy is “horrified” to find that “[the killer] *was* her father” (166). The irony here is clear—the boy has already been horrified to learn that his grandfather was essentially “the killer” of his Uncle Eddie who is murdered as an informer despite, we later find, the boy’s mother’s knowledge that he is innocent. The boy’s disbelief at this fictional father’s treachery clearly parallels his growing discomfort with his own family’s secrets and further emphasizes the stifling environment of Northern Ireland for a community divided by political views and devoted to multiple and often competing loyalties. As part of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, the boy is victim always to competing narratives that attempt to define him. That, according to

the boy's friend Moran, the boy is dense to have thought the killer was "the man in the drugstore" when "anyone would've known it was the da" reinforces the boy's innocence and his desire to locate the enemy outside his comfort zone. *Reading in the Dark* exposes, though, internal division that transcends external threat because it is ultimately more humiliating and tragic. Sergeant Burke, the violently overbearing policeman intent on shaming the boy's family, represents a state authority that attempts always to humiliate and subjugate the boy as part of an unwelcome religious and ethnic minority. Beyond this anti-national influence, though, Deane presents multiple authorities that vie for the boy's attention and acquiescence. Through Brother Regan, the boy's primary school superior of the famously austere Christian Brothers, Deane prominently highlights the role of Catholic education in supposedly stabilizing various forms of deviant desire. Deane's use of competing scripts of belonging and identity is most significant, though, in the novel's most mysterious secret, the true history of the boy's Uncle Eddie who disappears "the night of the big shoot-out at the distillery between the IRA and the police" (8) and who, we eventually find out, is killed by the IRA as an informer. The role of the IRA in the family's most surprising and devastating trauma is significant because it highlights Deane's most poignant and alarming critique—like the contemporary Irish authors writing in the Republic, Deane suggests here that postcolonial/colonial Irish nationalism is itself defeating and traumatizing to the people it purports to strengthen.

That Uncle Eddie disappears after an IRA-police confrontation suggests at once the role of British authority and IRA extremism in producing the paralysis, exile, and shame the boy witnesses in his family and the surrounding Irish Catholic community. Deane's "critique of colonialism," Liam Harte writes, "does not lead to an axiomatic celebration of the post-colonial nation as the proper outcome of the process of anti-colonial struggle." In fact, Harte suggests,

the “recognition of the ideological restrictions of colonialism *and* postcolonialism is the starting point for much of Deane’s critical writings” and informs “the ideological subtext of *Reading in the Dark*.”¹³² In *Reading in the Dark*, Deane indeed foregrounds the “restrictions” of “postcolonialism” via his critique of an Irish nationalism whose fervor creates the kind of divisive conflict it intends to erase. Despite misgivings about Edna Longley’s assertion that “it is sometimes doubtful whether [Deane] establishes a horizon beyond the narrator’s predicament,” (qtd. in Herron 179), Herron agrees that Deane “effectively erases any notion that Derry might be a place of even limited diversity” (179). I would argue that this erasure is critical to Deane’s project. The boy’s almost entirely Irish Catholic environment further demonstrates the self-imposed silence of the Irish community. While British imperialism has indeed destroyed the political hopes of Irish Republicans in Northern Ireland, the boy’s family’s trauma is internal, familial. The boy’s family history is rife with “blood feuds” that are both symptom and cause of familial division (140). As the boy uncovers his family’s secrets, he finds a family and a nation so torn by secrecy and guilt that it is unable to speak its own name and move beyond past trauma. His own confusion and despair reflect the consequences of such paralyzing tension for future Irish generations and the future of the still-divided Irish nation.

The narrator here stands in for a new generation of an Irish Catholic minority abandoned to a cruel, unfeeling ruling majority and, moreover, a tangible sense of shame, guilt, and sickness. Not least of Deane’s accomplishments in *Reading in the Dark* is his deft use of seemingly ordinary events in reflecting the sublime terror of exposure the boy feels. In one of the novel’s many references to “burning” and “fire,” the boy describes the destruction in 1950 of WWII bomb shelters and the ensuing infestation of rats to the city. As he describes with vivid imagery the necessary expulsion of the rats from their dumping ground hiding places, Deane

presents a “battle” in which the rats—“leaping...squeaking, twisting...moving...darting or scurrying at an amazing speed”—thrash about desperately despite certain expulsion and extinction by fire (79-80). In a novel centered around suspicious revelation and double-crossing informants, the term “rat” carries serious implications. The vigor and relish with which the townspeople participate in this cleansing suggest an intense desire to cleanse themselves of infesting disease and deviant hangers-on as they resurrect a history of British attempts to burn the Irish out of their homes and homeland. Later, after the boy’s mother learns of her father’s role in the murder of Uncle Eddie, she is consumed by grief expressed psychically as visions of “burning...all out there burning” (144). The panicked squeal of the “king rat”—“scream[ing] like a baby piglet”—further connects the lot of undesired squatters to the Irish themselves (80). The boy’s sympathy for the dying rats and his terror at the scene of this burn-out recalls his earlier moment of sympathy when passing the burned-out distillery, site of Uncle Eddie’s famous IRA shoot-out. “When passing there,” the boy says, “I would hear the terrified squealing of pigs from the slaughterhouse. They sounded so human I imagined they were going to break into words, screaming for mercy” (34). Amidst imagery of swirling smoke and fiery confusion, Deane conflates in these two scenes the historically damaging identification of the Irish with brute animality and the present fear of Irish expulsion from a British and Protestant dominated Northern Ireland. The extermination of “rats” as well makes present the threat of extreme Republicanism and the boy’s family’s inability to gain respect after suspected betrayal. In a final triangulation of imperial rhetoric, republican pressure, and disease, the boy feels “so sick that the flesh seemed to tighten on [his] bones.” At the sight of the “infested field...glowing and blurring like an inferno,” the boy imagines the “living rats that remained, breathing their vengeance in a dull miasmatic unison deep underground” (80). This haunting image of the “battle’s” survivors

and the “battleground” itself evoke a paralyzing and suffocating Northern Ireland in which the boy struggles to maintain an identity as a left-behind Irish Catholic and find release for the anger and humiliation that imperial authority yet instills.

Like many colonial and postcolonial Irish texts, *Reading in the Dark* indeed interrogates this process of identity formation amidst competing scripts of acceptable morality and nationality. The boy’s struggle demonstrates that the exhausting and terrifying paralysis so long the purview of Joycean colonial fiction maintains its hold on an Irish community constrained by the continued imperial presence in Northern Ireland and by the torn allegiances the rise and practice of nationalism create. Harte rightly suggests that “pre-eminent among [the novel’s concerns] are the disfiguring effects of both colonialism and postcolonial nationalism...the crisis of self-representation produced by colonialist discourse, and the dynamics of power and resistance, history and memory, language and identity within colonial relations” (152). Harte’s emphasis on the role of language and discourse is particularly interesting because it raises questions about the nature of Irishness itself and calls attention to the novel’s use of competing methodologies of identity formation. Deane’s use of supernatural elements and the interweaving of communal Irish legend amidst the boy’s more “proper” school lessons reminds us, Harte believes, that the “oral culture of [the boy’s] native community is about to be finally and irrevocably overlaid by the dominant state-sponsored culture of literacy.” In *Reading in the Dark*, Harte goes on to say, “oral, folkloric modes—vestigial features of an indigenous, precolonial discourse—represent one of the key narrative strategies by which the nationalist community validates and copes with the iniquities of its social and political subjugation” (159). Harte’s focus on this oral-literate slippage echoes Regan’s assertion that while “ostensibly a novel about growing up in a particular place at a particular time, it is also an excursion into the

realm of the fantastic” (238). Most importantly, I would suggest, the boy’s experience of these mixed modes of knowledge and history demonstrates the difficulty of combining and reconciling his lived experience with aspects of his identity deemed authentically Irish by a revivalist nationalism that looks to Gaelic legend for true Irish feeling. While Harte and Regan are right to suggest that Deane’s deft manipulation of these competing forms highlights the difficulty in maintaining an Irish identity amidst colonial occupation, they perhaps elide with this argument the uneasiness with which Deane invokes Gaelic myth. From the novel’s mysterious opening scene, in fact, we see a boy and his mother paralyzed by an unseen force whose presence carries with it a corpus of legend and tradition in which the boy fears he will become ensnared. As the novel progresses, the fear of these mysterious Irish ghosts materializes into a more worldly fear of extreme Irish nationalism and the disabling guilt that accompanies the fight for national liberation.

The novel’s opening scene—the boy and his mother chasing ghosts on the household staircase—displays a tension between present material concerns and supernatural legend that reflects a larger conflict in the boy’s process of identifying with the “unseen life” that characterizes revivalist images of Irish national culture. His mother’s initial uneasiness as well foreshadows the deterioration of her mental state and suggests, as the novel often does, a persistent link between Gaelic legend and madness. While the boy is clearly enthralled by the idea of ghosts—“We were haunted! We had a ghost, even in the middle of the afternoon”—his mother is exhausted and consumed by it—“It’s just your old mother with her nerves...My mother was crying quietly at the fireside” (4). The novel maintains this connection through its emphasis on the maddening caves of Grianan and through Aunt Katie’s story about the frightening, shape-changing, Irish-speaking children whose supernatural powers make their

caretaker go “strange in the head” (73). The boy’s description of Aunt Katie’s stories highlights a connection between magical tall-tales and the oppression of Irish Catholics at the hands of economic and political oppressors. Aunt Katie famously tells the children stories about

mothers whose children had been taken by the fairies but were always restored; haunted houses; men who escaped from danger and got back to their families; stolen gold; unhappy rich people and their lonely children; houses becoming safe and secure after overcoming threats from evicting landlords and police; saints burned alive who felt no pain; devils smooth and sophisticated who always wore fine clothes and talked in la-de-dah ways. (62)

This montage of colonial issues reflects the boy’s community’s desire to write new scripts that align English superiority with spiritual evil and suggest an ultimate victory for those who have historically faced surveillance, suspicion, and unsafe living conditions. The boy’s interest in these stories and his own desire to rewrite the narratives he encounters affirm the power of storytelling and these narratives’ ability to inflect his sense of identity and security. Part I of the novel ends, though, with the boy’s unnerving at the hands of Aunt Katie’s latest story. When the story moves from magical children to a focus on familial history and curses “a family can never shake off,” a sudden sense of fear and panic overcomes the boy. Aunt Katie’s mention of Grianan awakes “an instinct” in him and he begins hoping “that someone would come in an interrupt Katie.” The boy’s sudden longing for the house to be “alive with people...clattering the knives and forks...chattering about this and that” (68) reflects his desire to be grounded in present comforts and material well-being rather than stuck in a narrative that is beyond his immediate control. That Brigid, the story’s heroine, eventually goes insane and “never [speaks] again” (73) connects a fascination with and reliance on a mystical Gaelic past with silence and disease. Aunt Katie’s reference to Grianan—alongside discussions of familial curses and “terrible deeds”—evokes the boy’s growing discomfort with his own family’s secrets and brings together the boy’s concerns regarding national identification and authentic Irishness.

The legendary and actual history of Grianan is crucial to the novel's plot and to the message Deane conveys about Irishness, nationalism, and disability. Grianan functions in the novel as a site where myth, history, and disease converge. Deane situates the boy's traumatized recoiling from Aunt Katie's story about Brigid McLaughlin's descent to madness just after his father's story about Grianan's role in the literally chilling humiliation and destruction of a customs officer at the Northern Ireland/Free State border. According to his father, smugglers "took his customs jacket off, tied him up and closed him inside the passage. It was nearly two days before they found him, and he was stark, staring mad," a condition from which he'll never recover. He is "still in the asylum" and "they say he's always cold; never warmed up since. Never will" (59). It is important, of course, that Grianan effects this madness. In the passage at Grianan, the boy tells us, one could hear "the sleeping warriors of the legendary Fianna who lay below" waiting to be roused "from their thousand-year sleep to make final war on the English and drive them from our shores forever" (56). The boy's father's story thus becomes one of an almost organic rebellion in which the space itself enacts this debilitating vengeance. The madness that seems to have infected the Irish community is here identified with a magical Irish past and is as well wielded as a weapon against supposedly more rational and powerful authorities. Through this vignette, Deane thus triangulates Gaelic myth, political rebellion, and disease to suggest a connection between the community's deteriorating stability and its continued fight to define itself amidst imperial and national violence. Grianan's connection to the "sleeping Fianna" makes it especially significant in the boy's growing confusion about his national identity. Considering the vengeful rising of the Fianna, the boy notes he "was terrified that [he] might, by accident, make that special wish and feel the ground buckle under [him] and see the dead faces rise, indistinct behind their definite axes and spears" (56). While the Fianna

themselves are “indistinct” in the boy’s imagination, their weapons are clear, a vision that terrifies the boy with its implication for a violent national rebellion. Above all, he fears the mystical power that may by chance make him responsible for such an outburst of Irish violence. This fear reflects his identification with an ancient Gaelic community as it simultaneously aligns that community with an unwelcome danger. That his Uncle Eddie, we eventually learn, was shot by the IRA at Grianan as an incorrectly-fingered informant validates the boy’s seemingly irrational fear that his Irish nationalism will accidentally implicate him in a larger, more dangerous fight.

The boy’s child-like fascination both with Gaelic myth and actual historical violence betrays the complex interweaving of these decolonizing modes and suggests the difficulty in identifying with one despite the other. Throughout the novel, Deane in fact highlights the boy’s discomfort with republican (and imperial) violence as he displays the need for Irish rebellion against suffocating imperial scripts. The novel’s core emphasis on shame and secrecy in the Northern Ireland Catholic community confirms the confusion experienced by a Catholic minority unable to develop its own brand of Irishness without succumbing to IRA extremism. While the boy’s grandfather is pivotal to the central story of Uncle Eddie’s disappearance, his most important role in the story of the boy’s own development is perhaps in his example of steadfast Republicanism that budes neither for the British crown nor the Catholic Church. Though the boy is “horrified” by his grandfather’s refusal to repent and receive last rites on his deathbed, his horror is “striped with pride” that his grandfather is again “holding out” against supposed authorities that attempt to define him. In the boy’s anti-climactic telling of his grandfather’s confession-less deathbed scene, Deane presents liberation that is achieved through “holding out” rather than through revelation. The grandfather’s true self thrives as much by the rejection of

labels as by the taking on of traditional identifications. In these final moments of his life, the boy in fact presses his grandfather for the story of Billy Mahon's murder—a historical rebellion of sorts that has become Irish national legend in Derry—and is refused. His grandfather leaves the boy, though, two aphorisms that confirm the boy's position as a shameful colonial subject. "Some things were best forgotten," his grandfather says, "except that we had to keep up the fight against the government always, always" (125).

This disparity in attitude between school-yard intrigue and dying republican exasperation effectively underscores Deane's critique of a romantic Irish nationalism that creates real Irish trauma. The grandfather's refusal to discuss the details of this national fight as well confirms that Irish Republicanism in Northern Ireland exists always with an attendant sense of shame. The boy's experience of the Irish national fight indeed suggests that authentic Irishness, like the Irish language, is impractical and obsolete. His grandfather's assertion that "there's a lot of ancient history in this town they couldn't teach and wouldn't if they could" again indicts government suppression of a true Irish national narrative as it reinforces a sense of secrecy cultivated by the Church and the Irish themselves. Deane's handling of the "language question" is perhaps most poignant among colonial and postcolonial Irish writers in that it suggests an innate sense of Irish intimacy as it critiques revivalist or romantic notions of Irish exceptionalism. Having finally uncovered the tragic truths of his family's past, the boy can assuage his own sense of guilt only by writing out and reading aloud the "local history" that now shapes his view of familial and national belonging. In this mock-revelation, the boy can diffuse his own discomfort while protecting what semblance of peace his family retains. His use of Irish for this performance ironically suggests, then, a sense of liberation afforded only by the family's ignorance of the Irish language. The centrality of the Irish language in this equation does

reinforce, though, that the complexities of Irish political and cultural identification create in the boy's family and the Irish nation an intimacy always fraught with fear and sadness. Completing this critique, the boy's father's reaction—he “just nodded and smiled and said it sounded wonderful” (203)—ridicules amidst this intense familial conflict the romantic nationalist privileging of all things Irish without regard for their actual translation to modern concerns.

Reading in the Dark often walks this line between abstract national concerns and the physical reality of community life in mid-twentieth century Northern Ireland. As the boy pieces together the fragments of an incomplete family history, Deane presents the real Irish body suffering from poor living conditions that make death and disease commonplace in the Irish community. The boy's “first death” is his sister Una who dies in 1948 at the age of five. He introduces her death with a description both lyrical and haunting—she is “so hot that, pale and sweaty as she was, she had made [him] think of sunken fires... Her eyes shone with pain and pressure, inflated from the inside” (13). The boy's fascination with the names of illnesses—“diphtheria, scarlet fever or scarlatina, rubella, polio, influenza; they made me think of Italian football players or racing drivers or opera singers”—both highlights this transition from romantic ideals to gritty realities and suggests that the diseases themselves are alive in the Irish community, active players familiar to a young boy (13). Amidst familial despair about Una's impending death, the boy observes his father and uncles from a sheltered spot beneath the kitchen table. He notes that Uncle Dan is “allergic to the plaster he had to work with on the building site every day” and sees “dermatitis stains on [Uncle Dan's] fingers and knuckles.” His knowledge that next month “his hands [would be] all scabs and sores” and “Una would be long dead” displays the real suffering that infects the boy's community—those who survive, unlike Una, face bodily torment and sacrifice (15). Just before his Aunt Ena's death, the boy runs

desperately through town, “crimson sparks” of his aunt’s spewed blood spattered on his clothing, to notify his father that “something was wrong” with his sister who, we find later, “never had good health” (39-41). Chronologically between the deaths of these past and future generations, the boy is beaten by policemen who have torn apart and “splintered open” the family house looking for weapons and accusing his family of IRA involvement. While Deane briefly describes the boy’s beating, he highlights the traumatic after-image the suspicion and violence create. “For long after,” the boy tells us, “I would come awake in the small hours of the morning, sweating...the image of the police car would reappear and my hair would feel starched and my hands sweaty. The police smell took the oxygen out of the air and left me sitting there, with my chest heaving” (30). The image of stale air and suffocating suspicion is prevalent in the novel, reminding us always that physical suffering for the Irish community results from poor living conditions that as well reflect a history of imperial neglect and abuse. As the boy navigates family life amidst poverty, disease, and physical hardship, Deane thus creates an image of Irish living replete with pain that is both social and political, emotional and physical, of the body and of the mind, of the individual body and the Irish national body.

Through police beatings and the traumatic effects of familial and national betrayal, Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* connects political violence and the Irish national fight explicitly to disease and disability in the Irish community. The novel presents several parallel “blood feuds” that suggest constant division in the Irish community as they exhibit the disabling effects of warring notions of Irishness. The break-up of the boy’s father’s family after the death of his parents (the boy’s grandparents) incites the first longstanding familial war that haunts the novel with its implications of betrayal, marginalization, and abuse of power. Occurring in 1921, this familial break-up clearly mirrors the splitting of the Irish nation and the creation of seemingly

arbitrary bounds by which to define real Irishness and by which to delineate Irish freedom. The boy's father remembers staying with cousins and being forced to eat margarine because butter was a luxury "for the children of this house only" (46). The boy's curiosity uncovers other seemingly small maltreatments that contribute to the mystique of this family feud. "Was [the feud]," he wonders, "really because [father] had found out that his sisters were not really living in the house, but were being treated by the family as skivvies and had to sleep in an outhouse, beside the chickens" (50). The development of this "blood feud" and the appearance here of blood and class divisions reflects growing concern amidst partition and IRA extremism about who really is family. Who, the internal feuds ask, is truly Irish and can be trusted? Through this thematic concern, Deane seamlessly connects this farmhouse feud with the murder of Uncle Eddie, the other "blood feud" that haunts the boy's family. Both physically begin at the farmhouse—the boy's aunts are sent to live there as second-class cousins; Uncle Eddie is taken there by the IRA for interrogation—both mirror the larger break-up of the Irish nation, and both display an incapacitating sense of guilt and shame for those who live with the knowledge of familial and national destruction. Upon hearing of his father's unnecessary shame about Uncle Eddie's supposed betrayal, the boy feels a love for his father so great he fears his "face would start to break up into little patches and [he] would have to hold it together with the strap of [his] helmet" (140). This image of literally fractured identity is precious in a novel so consumed with broken bodies and fragmented history. Such intense love develops in this moment because, as the boy knows but his father does not, the boy's father feels an unnecessary shame. Uncle Eddie did not actually inform on his fellows. The boy's desire for wholeness and his capacity for love amidst conflict suggest that in Catholic Northern Ireland an unnecessary shame cripples an oppressed Irish community.

Ostensibly a nationalist “who-done-it,” *Reading in the Dark* ultimately reveals more than the facts surrounding the boy’s family history. The novel effectively uses this mysterious IRA entanglement and the persistence of family “blood feuds” to catalogue the physical and emotional effects of familial and national division. The boy’s mother and the town wanderer “Crazy Joe” share, we ultimately find, the most secret knowledge about Uncle Eddie’s disappearance and the true informer’s identity. Significantly, then, these two characters as well face the most devastating mental deterioration and reflect the disabling power of this political strife. Crazy Joe hauntingly asserts that “the mere proximity of the past ruins [his] indigestion” and causes “spiritual constipation” (197). This stifling image of unmoving physical and spiritual development mirrors the boy’s earlier description of his mother who, having found out her father’s role in Uncle Eddie’s death, begins “going out from [the family], becoming strange, becoming possessed” by grief and shame (145). The boy wishes for “a magic syringe that [he] could push up into the inside skin of her arm and withdraw, black with grief, and keep plunging it and withdrawing it, over and over, until it came out clear” (146). This beautifully-rendered image of clotted, stagnant infection displays the body’s and spirit’s metaphorical death though the boy’s mother walks among the Northern Irish living. She is, like so many others in Derry and in Ireland, “alive and inanimate, buried upright in the dead air” (193). As the novel moves toward a close and the boy’s knowledge grows deeper, Deane repeatedly invokes this kind of in-between living, that which the Catholic minority of Northern Ireland must suffer while identifying with an Irishness itself imagined, inaccessible, or anathema. The silence and despair that attend the boy’s community create a space suffocating because secrecy divides the people there against each other and against themselves. Derry’s environment parallels the sense of insanity and helplessness that defines Crazy Joe:

To live with this condition of his was, [Crazy Joe] said, the great connubium of his infelicity—the condition of being sane married to the condition of being mad; the knowledge that he was mad married to the knowledge that he was sane; knowing that he was harmless but that his condition made others harmful.

Crazy Joe's role as both inscrutable fool and wise prophet truly encapsulates this insufferable condition and suggests an Irishness whose violent history creates an identity inevitably split and therefore stunted. Toward the novel's end, the resurgence of national and imperial violence reminds the reader that Irish freedom is still under fire. The boy—now a man—tellingly finds comfort in the silence he previously despised. In their silence, he believes, his parents have found solace and unburdened themselves of what division prevented true peace. The final vision of his parents' togetherness suggests, though, that the boy's sense of solace may be as romantically constructed as his earlier notions of the sleeping Fianna. "Now," he says, "as the war in the neighborhood intensified, they both sat there in their weakness, entrapped in the noise from outside and in the propaganda noise of the television inside" (243). As the Troubles descend upon Derry and inevitably awaken the ghosts of 1921, the boy's parents remind us that even "in their weakness" they must face a noisy bombardment of scripts by which they will inevitably be defined.

Irish Ability: Revisionist Narratives of National Potential

In her 2004 review of recent Irish fiction, Kim McMullen asserts that the "persistent presence of the past animates to a considerable extent, the current renaissance of Irish fiction" (126). Her recognition here is at once commonplace and significant—the "persistent presence of the past," we have seen, clearly has spurred each renaissance of Irish fiction and has stirred Irishness from its first decolonizing desires. Furthermore, Irish fiction of the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries presents both an Ireland consumed by the past—often at the expense of the future—and an Ireland in which the past of imperial domination and political conquest is always still present. In a much more nuanced and significant contention, McMullen claims that the “damaged psyches and emotional struggles” portrayed in recent Irish novels “gesture toward residual social pathologies, borne by the economic, cultural, and social isolation, emotional austerity, and sexual repression that attended Ireland’s emergence as an independent nation in the 1930-1960 period” (127-8). This coincidence in national growth and individual devastation is particularly ironic and of special importance in our understanding of the role of national rhetoric and social ideology in shaping individual consciousness. McMullen’s own gesture toward Irish fiction’s mentally and emotionally damaged characters does not even, perhaps, go far enough in recognizing the defining disabilities that fill Irish literature of both the colonial and postcolonial periods. The prominence of physical impairment and disease highlights the underlying disability that can exist amidst economic growth and long-awaited political control. These disabilities, Irish literature claims, expose the inevitable development of social hierarchies and the necessary marginalizing of those deemed inferior or “abnormal” according to predetermined standards of acceptable behavior, belief, and ability.

As Cal says, “a man damn[s] himself” (91). MacLaverty’s accidental IRA martyr reflects an Ireland that paralyzes and threatens its own capacity for development. In Edna O’Brien’s much earlier meditation on the Irish *bildungsroman*, Caithleen Brady dreams of killing her son Cash and thus living “sick with pain because she had killed the only person she was capable of loving” (448). The novel does not ultimately realize this foreshadowed tragedy and regret. Rather, Caithleen’s desire to nurture her son and regenerate her community is overwhelmed by her fear of living a life circumscribed by ideals she cannot attain. Her self-sterilization and

suicide confirm a developing literary obsession with stunted growth. Such budding concerns with physical and sexual disability themselves overwhelm all sense of possibility and germination in Samuel Beckett's display of man—modern, postcolonial, Irish—in his most bodiless and, ironically, most body-obsessed state. Beckett presents an Irishness that “goes on” despite disability and recognizes as living breaths the suffering gasps that respectable society hopes to silence. This re-evaluation of disability, disease, and suffering forces a critical rethinking of social rules and national standards as, we hope, it re-values Irishness itself.

In this continuing literary revolt against normativity and national idealism, Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* unashamedly champions the disenfranchised and disabled to create an inclusive and truly noble sense of Irishness. Against the oppressive strictures of romantic sacramental Catholicism, Henry Smart cautions against God's “gifts” to the slums—“fever, typhoid or whooping cough, smallpox, pneumonia or rats” (33). These diseases and terrors, for Henry, define an abused British colony struggling to breathe more than caring about a national fight. For Doyle and his contemporaries, the reality of these colonial Irish slums and the ignorance of their plight—both the lack of awareness and the willful erasure—by the official faces of the Irish literary and political revival mandate a rewriting of Irish rebellion that recognizes the Irish as flawed but capable. Irish disability, these authors claim, perhaps follows from Irish refusal to accept, acknowledge, and support the various strains of Irishness that coalesce in a nation as clearly varied in religious belief, sexual orientation, physical health, and economic status as it is strongly united by unquenchable desire for moral freedom and individual peace.

¹ Lennard Davis, *Enforcing normalcy: disability, deafness, and the body* (London: Verso, 1995), 3.

² For more on the development of disability discourse see Davis's *Bending Over Backwards* (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 10-12. Davis highlights the critical divide between the notion of impairment and that of disability—a category that is, he believes, always socially constructed. Disability is not, like impairment, “bred into the bone” but rather created by an able-ist notion of “normalcy” (12).

³ Davis's thorough discussion of Galton's “eugenicist interests” charts the move from Gauss's bell curve to a concept of the “norm” that privileges a desired trait and ranks rather than averages the distribution of human traits. Galton's work presents a significant revision in that, for example, while tallness and shortness would, on a bell curve, both signify extreme errors (that is, not be “normal”), Galton's ranked order would show tallness to be the exceptional and therefore preferred trait. For more on eugenics and the creation of statistical norms, see Lyndsay Andrew Farrall's *The Origin and Growth of the English Eugenics Movement* (New York: Garland, 1985) and Stephen Stigler's *The History of Statistics: The Measurement of Uncertainty before 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986).

⁴ Davis notes also that many people with cognitive disabilities are eventually incarcerated by the state. He cites a *New York Times* article asserting that as of the year 2000, 10% of death row inmates in the US were mentally disabled. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 28.

⁵ The penal laws as well exemplify the use of disability discourse to in fact disable political potential. British labeling of Irish Catholics as irrational and superstitious because of their religious practices justifies the enactment of the penal laws which then serve to marginalize Irish Catholics and refuse them social participation. Hence, perceived impairment becomes actual disability.

⁶ Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000).

⁷ For more on Burke's role in the shaping of imperial rhetoric and policy, see Chapter 1, “Arnold, Burke, and the Celts” in Seamus Deane's *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber, 1985). As Corbett and Deane both explain, Burke is famously pro-Irish in his disdain for the penal laws but only in that such Irish oppression causes unrest rather than allegiance to the Empire.

⁸ Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature* (New York: Kennikat, 1970), 110, emphasis added.

⁹ The feminizing of the Celt is clearly linked to imperial tendency to exoticize and subjugate colonial “Others.” For more on this link, see Joseph Lennon, “Irish Orientalism: An Overview” in *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Clare Carroll and Patricia King (Notre Dame: UND Press, 2003).

¹⁰ see also Douglas Hyde's “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” in *Language, lore, and lyrics*, ed. Breándan Ó Conaire (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986), 153-170.

¹¹ D.P. Moran, “The Battle of Two Civilizations” in *Ideals In Ireland*, ed. Lady Gregory (New York: Lemma Publishing Corporation, 1901), 25.

¹² In formulating his definition of Irish national character, Yeats carefully navigates the many factions of Irish society and must combat his own possible exclusion as an Anglo-Irish Protestant from a peasant class he champions as the repository of true Gaelic myth. Yeats accomplishes this task by imagining/creating an idea of Irishness not bound simply to a particular land/bloodline but rather dependent on a sense of shared ethnicity through communal belonging

and spiritual values. For more on the construction of ethnicity and nation, see Anthony Smith, “Social Construction and Ethnic Genealogy” in *The Nation in History* (Hanover: UP of New England, 2000), 60-75 and Ernest Renan’s “What is a nation?” in *Nation and Narration* ed. H.K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8-22.

¹³ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880-1980* (London: Faber, 1985), 14-15.

¹⁴ Edna O’Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy* (New York: Plume, 1986), 29.

¹⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger in Collected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964).

¹⁶ This chapter largely critiques Free State ideology and its allegiance to Catholic moral codes as defining national doctrines. For more on the overtly religious rhetoric of Irish revolutionaries and the Free State Government, see Declan Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland* (London: Random House, 1995), 211-263. Kiberd claims that moral standards in the Irish Free State meant that there was “less freedom in post-independence Ireland” as “the previous attempt to arraign the enemy without gave way to a new campaign against the heretic within” (263). O’Brien and Kavanagh both certainly attest to strict surveillance by Church leaders and the equation of patriotism and spiritual purity.

¹⁷ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Critical Study* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1991), 120.

¹⁸ W.B. Yeats, “The Celtic Element in Literature” in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 176.

¹⁹ In *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh’s critique of Yeatsian/Revivalist peasant mythologizing comes second only to his caustic assault on Catholic Church morality and the imposition of such moral codes on the Irish people as part of a national program for the growth of a successful citizenry. Kavanagh’s Ireland was, David Fitzpatrick tells us, one in which “all legislation with moral implication” was “submitted to church leaders for approval before its introduction in the Dáil.” The government and the Church were, he says, “at one in regarding the Free State as a Catholic rather than pluralist society.” David Fitzpatrick, “Ireland Since 1870” in *The Oxford History of Ireland*, ed. R.F. Foster (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 223.

²⁰ Kavanagh’s critique of Catholic morality’s presumed primacy in the definition of Free State Irishness reflects what Terence Brown calls de Valera’s “almost instinctual association of Catholicism with the Irish way of life.” According to Brown, de Valera’s government—under which Kavanagh is writing—“was zealous in its efforts to ensure that Catholic morality should be enforced by legislation and that public life...should be blessed by an official clerical presence.” See Terence Brown’s *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 116.

²¹ It is interesting to note that Kavanagh portrays Maguire’s mother not as a victim but rather as another in a series of watchful oppressors. As a representative of Mother Church, she reinforces the belief that earthly lack will lead to heavenly fulfillment. That she has “stayed too long” reinforces Kavanagh’s portrait of stagnant existence without development and perhaps suggests that the watchful Church she represents has also overstayed its welcome.

²² Patrick Kavanagh quoted in Alan Warner, *Clay is the Word* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1973), 52.

²³ Weldon Thornton, “Virgin Queen or Hungry Fiend? The Failure of Imagination in Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*,” *Mosaic* 12.3 (1979), 158. Though Thornton scathingly critiques Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival’s exultation of peasant potential, he as well suggests that Kavanagh finds fault with the Irish farmer for not reaching his potential.

²⁴ Augustine Martin, “The Apocalypse of Clay: Technique and Vision in *The Great Hunger*” in *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Maine: Univ. of Maine Press, 1986), 291. Martin highlights Kavanagh’s use of routine and repetition as a critique of deadening social and moral ideologies. Such emphasis on mechanized life clearly links Kavanagh to his successors, like Samuel Beckett, whose obsessive repetitions reveal that outward routine far outlasts, subsumes, and eventually erases internal significance.

²⁵ Theo Veldhuis, “Bound to the Soil: Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*,” *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 12.4 (1982), 285.

²⁶ For further discussion of the Land Acts of the late 1800s and effect on marriage age and land inheritance, see Veldhuis, “Bound to the Soil,” 283.

²⁷ For more on Kavanagh’s contemporaries—especially Seán O’Faoláin and Frank O’Connor—and artistic backlash against the rhetoric of Irish exceptionality and pastoral purity, see O’Faoláin’s “Yeats and the Younger Generation,” *Horizon* 25 (1942), 43-54.

²⁸ In “Stony Grey Soil,” Kavanagh’s use of animal imagery in describing his home county of Monaghan highlights the true brutality of country living. In explicit contrast to abstract Revivalist musings, Kavanagh claims that country life has “flung a ditch” on his vision and impedes the artist’s imagination. See *Collected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 82-3.

²⁹ John Redmond, “‘All the Answers’: The Influence of Auden on Kavanagh’s Poetic Development,” *New Hibernia Review* 8.1 (2004), 24.

³⁰ Maguire’s (and, later, Caithleen Brady’s) decision to ignore such rules against sexual impurity because his acts are private, hidden, and therefore not punishable reinforces that de Valera’s national program and the Church’s policing of individual behavior in fact attempt to create a certain ideal of Irishness more than they reflect actual belief by Ireland’s citizens in the equation of sexual purity and personal worth.

³¹ Sandra Manoogian Pearce, “An Interview with Edna O’Brien,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22.2 (1996), 6.

³² For more on the largely superficial reception of O’Brien’s novels and discussion of her Irish “persona,” see Sean McMahon’s “A Sex by Themselves: An Interim Report on the Novels of Edna O’Brien,” *Éire Ireland* 2.1 (1967) and Peggy O’Brien’s “The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O’Brien,” *The Massachusetts Review* (Autumn 1987).

³³ Rebecca Pelan, “Edna O’Brien’s ‘World of Nora Barnacle,’” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22.2 (1996), 53.

³⁴ A study of disability in *The Country Girls* reveals an interesting layering of signifiers and discourses that create the conditions for Kate’s eventual suicide. The novels expose the commonality of mental illness in rural Ireland as well as its maltreatment. At the same time, O’Brien’s focus on Kate’s torn allegiance to oppressive moral and national codes of conduct reflects her critique of these narratives as disabling and stifling to the individual. Kate’s inability to live up to these standards is viewed by her community as an impairment which then renders her outside of proper national fitness. In addition, her position as Irish woman makes her from the start “disabled” in the eyes of her foreign (and male) suitors.

³⁵ The threat that Kate will be labeled mentally ill if she cohabitates and fornicates with Eugene also brings to mind the Magdalen Laundries and the Catholic Church’s policing of sexual activity through the punishment of unwed mothers. For a thorough investigation of this phenomenon and practice, see James Smith’s *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (Notre Dame: UND Press, 2007).

³⁶ Lisa Colletta and Maureen O'Connor, eds. *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O'Brien* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 6.

³⁷ Rebecca Pelan, "Edna O'Brien's 'Love Objects'" in *Wild Colonial Girl*, 63.

³⁸ Ireland's prohibition on contraceptives and abortion clearly impacts the trajectory of our heroines' development and is referenced obliquely in the girls' panic over pregnancy and resultant punishment. Baba's frantic and horrific efforts to cause a miscarriage after her accidental pregnancy prefigure Kate's self-sterilization and also undermine any attempt to view this act as liberating or powerful.

³⁹ Kristine Byron, "'In the Name of the Mother...': Reading and Revision in Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*" in *Wild Colonial Girl*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Speeches and Statements by Eamon de Valera 1917-73*, ed. Maurice Moynihan (New York: St. Martin's, 1980), 321.

⁴¹ Leonard Raven-Hill, "The Unwise Pig" in *Punch*, 1 February 1933.

⁴² This is one of the novel's few overt historical references to England's violent role in shaping Ireland's physical environment as well as its national consciousness. The reference to "the Tans" and to Brady family indifference to their land ironically suggests that Kate's ancestors—living in the pre-war colony—enjoyed more pride and self-possession than their free Irish counterparts.

⁴³ Amanda Greenwood, *Edna O'Brien* (UK: Northcote House, 2003), 34.

⁴⁴ Mary Salmon, "Edna O'Brien" in *Contemporary Irish Novelists*, ed. Rüdiger Imhof (Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1990), 143.

⁴⁵ This particular juxtaposition—of romanticized European civilities and an equally mythologized view of Celtic royalty—echoes the Revivalist exhortations of Hyde, Moran, and Yeats who all chastise Irish tendency to emulate and revere all things English at the expense of their own Irish civilization. O'Brien also mocks, though, the nationalist tendency to instead privilege vague myths of Irish superiority that have no real foundation.

⁴⁶ Greenwood, *Edna O'Brien*, 32.

⁴⁷ Corbett reminds us that in the political Union of Great Britain and Ireland, Ireland is represented always as "a complementary but ever unequal partner" (53). Kate's relationships with Mr. Gentleman and Eugene perfectly illustrate this seeming contradiction—in the presence of these powerful foreign men, Kate recognizes her Irishness as a disability. Away from them, Kate romanticizes her rural Irish past and equates Irishness with pleasant memories of her mother and the comfort of home.

⁴⁸ Salmon, "Edna O'Brien," 150.

⁴⁹ George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* in *George Bernard Shaw's Plays*, ed. Sandie Byrne (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002). As in *Pygmalion*, here we see tested the concept of the unequal union. Kate's torn allegiance to Eugene results from the belief that he somehow saved her from a life less privileged—that is, more Irish—and his patronizing attitude suggests that she is somehow worth saving if he can alter and civilize her. Both works reflect Ireland's unique position among the Empire's colonies—singled out for inclusion (and thus implicitly esteemed) as it is simultaneously rejected for savage behavior and backward values.

⁵⁰ It also clearly connects moral deviance—the writing of the "dirty" note and its implication of sexual impropriety—with impairment and disability. In breaking these moral codes, Kate and Baba represent a "diseased" part of the nation rather than exemplifying "real" (that is, healthy and acceptable) Irishness.

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- ⁵¹ Lorna Rooks-Hughes, “The Family and the Female Body in the Novels of Edna O’Brien and Julia O’Faolin,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22.2 (1996), 88.
- ⁵² James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 220.
- ⁵³ Samuel Beckett, “Censorship in the Saorstát” in *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove, 1984), 86-7. Beckett’s treatise on the disabling cultural effects of Irish literary censorship highlights the connection between national image, cultural provincialism, and bodily reproduction. Beckett’s references here to both “Cuchulains” and Ireland’s ban on literature that promotes reproductive contraception clearly critiques the Free State belief in myths—Gaelic and Catholic—of Irish moral exceptionalism at the expense of its citizens’ liberty.
- ⁵⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 1965), 226.
- ⁵⁵ Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (New York: Delta, 1992).
- ⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 263. See particularly sections VI, VII, and XVII of “Theses” for Benjamin’s discussion of history’s occluded repressions. Because he is marginalized and erased by a supposedly “proper” and “official” history, Francie’s personal development critiques, I would argue, the kind of linear historicizing Benjamin believes favors social and historical victors at the expense of the oppressed.
- ⁵⁷ Though originally written in 1941, Flann O’Brien’s *The Poor Mouth* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998) is a fictional autobiography whose story recounts Gaelic peasant life during the Union/colonial (that is, pre-Free State) period.
- ⁵⁸ For more on uneven development and its relationship to colonialism, see Joshua Esty’s “The Colonial Bildungsroman: The Story of an African Farm and the Ghost of Goethe,” *Victorian Studies* 49.3 (2007), 407-30.
- ⁵⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.
- ⁶⁰ Seamus Deane, “Introduction,” *Nationalism Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 9.
- ⁶¹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Random House, 1995), 263.
- ⁶² Tim Gauthier, “Identity, Self-Loathing and the Neocolonial Condition in Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy*,” *Critique* 44.2 (2003). Mrs. Nugent is a particularly interesting character because of her representation simultaneously of the colonizing culture and the newly-formed national image of upward mobility. That these two ideals coalesce in one character illustrates how similar the two “regimes” are in their definition of acceptability and ability. Essentially, Francie is terrorized by the depiction of himself as a terror to Irish national image.
- ⁶³ Donna Potts, “From Tír na nÓg to Tír na Muck: Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy*,” *New Hibernia Review* 3.3 (1999), 86. It is interesting to note also the closeness of *Muck*—Gaelic for “pig”—to “Mick,” common slang for an Irishman due to its commonality in Irish surnames.
- ⁶⁴ Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, “The Primacy of Form” in *De Valera And His Times*, ed. John P. O’Carroll and John A. Murphy (Cork: Cork UP, 1983), 47.
- ⁶⁵ For more on O’Brien’s use of Revivalist caricature, see Sarah McKibben’s “An Béal Bocht: Mouting Off at National Identity,” *Éire Ireland* 38.1 (2003), 37-53. McKibben claims that *The Poor Mouth* is “less a parody of earlier works than of audience expectations of the genre. As a result,” she says, *The Poor Mouth* also criticizes “the calcified discourse of national identity... in post-independence Ireland.”

⁶⁶ Martin McLoone, “The Abused Child of History: Neil Jordan’s *The Butcher Boy*,” *Cineaste* 23.4 (1998), 32-36.

⁶⁷ Tom Herron, “ContamiNation: Patrick McCabe and Colm Tóibín’s Pathographies of the Republic” in *Contemporary Irish Fiction*, eds. Liam Harte and Michel Parker (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 176.

⁶⁸ Herron concentrates his reading of *The Butcher Boy* largely on the clash between a “new” global, telecommunicational, postmodern society and a “traditional” Ireland rooted in the social and religious character of the state. Madness, Herron claims, is the consequence of this confrontation. Herron rightly notes Irish anxiety about modernization and liberalization at the time the novel takes place. During this key period, Herron says, the modernizing vision of Seán Lemass was supplanting and upsetting the traditional socio-economic conservatism of de Valerian Ireland.

⁶⁹ Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 32.

⁷⁰ J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985 Politics and Society* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 159.

⁷¹ In the film *The Butcher Boy*, co-written by Patrick McCabe and Neil Jordan, Sinéad O’Connor stars as the Virgin Mary with whom Francie has many candid chats about his relationship with family and friends. O’Connor’s role in the film—5 years after she famously blasphemed the Catholic Church by tearing up a picture of the Pope during a musical performance on *Saturday Night Live*—itself registers a tension in Ireland’s imagined and actual relationship to official Catholicism. Francie’s visions highlight his position outside acceptable Catholic morality as they remind us that he always exists within national scripts of Catholic belonging. Francie’s overly candid and personal relationship with the Virgin vision in fact suggests that in his mental illness Francie can more fully connect to a spiritual world that official religious observance keeps remote from human contact.

⁷² Deane, “Introduction,” *Nationalism Colonialism and Literature*, 9.

⁷³ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, “‘The Man They Could never Forgive’—The View of the Opposition: Eamon de Valera and the Civil War” in *De Valera And His Times*, eds. John P. O’Carroll and John A. Murphy (Cork: Cork UP, 1983), 95.

⁷⁴ McCabe’s use in the novel of the overtly opposing historical reception of Collins’s and de Valera’s acts as well highlights the reduction of these figures to clichéd phrases about patriotism and valor.

⁷⁵ Carole Zucker, “The Poetics of Point of View: Neil Jordan’s *The Butcher Boy*,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 31.3 (2003), 205.

⁷⁶ Edward Said, “Yeats and Decolonization,” *Nationalism Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 83.

⁷⁷ Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), 25.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 22. See particularly Mercier’s chapter “Ireland/The World” for his discussion of Beckett’s curious Irishness. Mercier interestingly notes that Foxrock, Beckett’s home town, “deliberately avoided much of Irish popular culture while providing regrettably little English culture, high or low, to put in its place” (37). This acknowledgement suggests that Beckett’s relationship to Irish culture exhibits the familiar sense of “in-between-ness” we see in his writings and often identify with modernist writing more generally.

⁷⁹ Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), 263.

⁸⁰ Mercier also notes that because the Irish language was not a mandatory subject in Protestant schools, “even this rather factitious element of Irishness was missing” in Beckett’s upbringing (37). While Beckett—like Yeats and Joyce before him—did not speak Gaelic, his characters’ obsessive notice of this lack suggests a critique of both imperial claims on Irishness and national attempts to recover it.

⁸¹ John P. Harrington, *The Irish Beckett* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1991), 171.

⁸² Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 126, 129.

⁸³ Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove, 1957), 1-2.

⁸⁴ Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove, 1953), 16. In the very structure of *Watt*, Beckett presents a prototype for the anti-developmental novel. Beckett defines Watt’s character not by a linear progression or developmental arch toward finality but rather by a series of repetitions and numerical calculations that highlight circularity, regression, and intermediacy.

⁸⁵ Terry Eagleton, “Political Beckett?” *New Left Review* 40 (2006), 67-74.

⁸⁶ Jim Hansen, *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 200. In his discussion of Irish modernism and the return of Gothic tropes, Hansen claims that “Beckett shows us just how all-encompassing and internalized the social and philosophical machinery of confinement has become” (279). As an end point for Hansen’s discussion of the Gothic, Beckett’s fiction reveals the impossibility of autonomy and thus critiques society’s imperialist/capitalist order. His highlighting of classic Gothic tropes—doubling, confinement, anxiety, illegitimacy—is particularly useful for our study here of the ways in which Beckett’s characters are doubly oppressed by physical incarceration and the oppressive cultural scripts that demand their evolution toward legitimacy and rationality (that is, away from, essentially, “the Gothic”).

⁸⁷ *Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940*, eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (New York: Cambridge UP, 2009), 384.

⁸⁸ Beckett, *First Love* in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* (New York: Grove, 1995), 31. *First Love* presents a fascinating narrative for our study of reproduction and sterility in the Irish nation and, more importantly, the Irish national imaginary. Ending both with a birth and an abandonment of the newborn, *First Love* rejects narrative closure and relegates the birth moment—as does so much Beckett fiction—to the horrors of life experience. “What finished me,” the narrator says, “was the birth” (44).

⁸⁹ Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1968), 124.

⁹⁰ An interesting collusion takes place here regarding impairment, disability, and marginalization. Unlike some of their counterparts in modern Irish fiction, Beckett’s characters routinely exhibit disability that specifically reflects physical, bodily impairment. I read such physical disfiguring in Beckett’s texts as reflecting the characters’ marginalization—and, thus, their political and social inability to participate in the development of national consciousness—and as indicative of the physical violence imperial and, later, national authorities inflict on the Irish people. In Beckett, impairment thus derives from and results in cultural disability.

⁹¹ David Weisberg, *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 8, 47.

⁹² David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 54.

⁹³ The prevalence of impairment and disability in Beckett's texts makes them perhaps the most important contributors to a history of narrative form in which the protagonist is defined by his physical prowess and mental acumen. As I have argued throughout, Beckett's characters not only reflect a historically oppressed nation, they also champion an Irishness that does not conform to modern notions of acceptable development and national character. In considering disability as a socially constructed category opposed to a determined "norm," we realize that in Beckett's texts, his characters may be "impaired" but they are, in a sense, not disabled because their impairment reflects that world's "normalcy."

⁹⁴ Mrs. Lambert's role in the family highlights the mock-liberation afforded to Ireland's women. Like Francie's mother, Mrs. Lambert can find comfort only in an ideal of domestic wholeness that in fact demands her confinement within the domestic space despite the brutality she encounters there.

⁹⁵ The development of Irish nationalism out of an emulation of British culture and politics represents perhaps the most debilitating force confronting modern Ireland's self-determination. For more on the necessity of revitalizing and creating culture through deolonization, see Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963), particularly the section "On National Culture." Fanon writes that "the struggle" for sovereignty "itself in its development and in its internal progression send culture along different paths and traces out entirely new ones for it. The struggle for freedom does not give back to the national culture its former values and shapes; this struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men cannot leave intact either the form or the content of the people's culture" (245-6). I quote Fanon at length to reveal what I see as the Irish colony's refusal to develop a sense of Irish nationality that accounts for the modernization of its people and is responsible to the citizens who make up its revolutionary forces. In adhering to an unmoving notion of Irish culture that both emulates and defines itself against British ideals, the Irish nation ultimately suffocates the citizens who hoped political freedom would mean personal liberty.

⁹⁶ Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in *Modern Irish Drama*, ed. John P. Harrington (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 3-11.

Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (New York: Scribner, 2001).

⁹⁷ In a 2002 interview with *Advocate*, Jamie O'Neill in fact answers the very question his novel asks about the bounds of Irish freedom. According to O'Neill, the book's acclaim has finally led to acceptance from his mother who had previously shunned him because of embarrassment regarding his homosexuality. It seems, then, that the privilege of acceptance into an authentic Irish community is still withheld, one hundred years after the Rising, from those who profess the same "unspeakable" desires as O'Neill's revolutionary characters.

For the full interview, see Michael Glitz, "Irish Revolutionary," *Advocate* 868. July 23, 2002: 65-66.

⁹⁸ Jodie Medd, "'Patterns of the Possible': National Imaginings and Queer Historical (Meta)Fictions in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*," *GLQ* 13.1 (2007), 17.

⁹⁹ Kim McMullen, "New Ireland/Hidden Ireland: Reading Recent Irish Fiction," *Kenyon Review* 26.2 (2004), 134-5.

¹⁰⁰ Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁰¹ Lady Gregory and Yeats, "Our Irish Theatre" in *Modern Irish Drama*, 378-9.

¹⁰² D.P. Moran, "The Gaelic Revival" in *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (Dublin: James Duffy, MH Gill and Son, Leader Office, ca. 1906), 79.

¹⁰³ D.P. Moran, “The Battle of Two Civilizations” in *Ideals in Ireland*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Yeats, “To the Editor of *United Ireland*” in *The Uncollected Prose of W.B. Yeats*, ed. John Frayne (New York: Columbia UP, 1970), 256.

¹⁰⁵ See Floyd Skloot’s review, “Irish Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking” in *Sewanee Review* 107.4 (1999), which asserts that Henry “is reared on myths that he must shatter in order to survive.” See also, José Lanter’s “Demythicalizing/Remythicalizing the Rising: Roddy Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry*,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 8.1 (2002), 245-58.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Chadwick, “Family Romance as National Allegory in Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Dreaming of the Bones*,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 32.3 (1986), 157.

¹⁰⁷ Yeats, “On Baile’s Strand” in *Modern Irish Drama*, 12-32.

¹⁰⁸ See also Yeats’s “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 33.

¹⁰⁹ Yeats’s Revivalist period sees many writings that navigate this spiritual/material tension. See also *The Twisting of the Rope* and *The Crucifixion of the Outcast* for Yeats’s suggestion that the true poet of Ireland possesses an authentic Gaelic spirituality that is in fact threatening to the unenlightened Irish peasants. This maneuver of course justifies Yeats’s role as national poet and ensconces him within a Gaelic tradition from which he may seemingly be cut off (as an Anglo-Irish Protestant). Yeats’s *Mythologies*, ed. Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹¹⁰ James W. Flannery, “On Baile’s Strand” in *Modern Irish Drama*, 422.

¹¹¹ Yeats, “Easter, 1916” in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*.

¹¹² Historians agree that the executions of the Easter Rebels cemented their place in Irish revolutionary mythology and transformed public opinion about the Rising in Ireland. While many had been indifferent to this ill-planned Rising and even annoyed by the disturbance, the executions ignited nationalist fervor and extreme backlash against the British. See Liz Curtis, *The Cause of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1994), especially 279-86.

¹¹³ It is interesting to note, as well, that Doyle and O’Neill both—in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century—highlight with their characters the tension between socialist rebels and Catholic/cultural nationalists. The in-fighting among the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers reflects a divided Ireland and the difficulty of defining an Irishness for which all citizens would be willing to fight.

¹¹⁴ On reaction to looting during the Easter Rising, see Curtis, *Cause of Ireland*, 275. As Mr. Mack fears, the looting citizens, Curtis writes, “allowed the press to smear the insurgents as a rabble mob.”

¹¹⁵ Margot Gayle Backus, “‘More Useful Washed and Dead’: James Connolly, W.B. Yeats, and the Sexual Politics of ‘Easter, 1916,’” *Interventions* 10.1 (2008), 68-9.

¹¹⁶ Joseph Valente, “Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim Two Boys*,” *Éire Ireland* 40.3 (2005), 66.

¹¹⁷ For more on anxiety surrounding Irishness and homosexuality, see Valente’s insightful discussion of shame and sexuality. Valente argues that Kettle’s interrogation of MacMurrough’s sexuality is driven by Kettle’s fear of being tainted by Irish nationalism. MacMurrough’s identification with Oscar Wilde’s unspeakable *Irishness*, rather than his famously derided homosexuality, thus increases Kettle’s shame and includes him in this collective identification. See especially Valente, “Race/Sex/Shame,” 77.

¹¹⁸ That Doyler can speak Irish importantly aligns him with the Revivalist desire to reconnect with authentic Gaelic culture and claim cultural space apart from imperial influence. It is especially significant, then, that Doyler is the novel's most maligned nationalist. In Doyler, O'Neill brings together cultural nationalism's most desired quality and its most feared—the perversity and femininity with which it identifies homosexuality.

¹¹⁹ Here, O'Neill successfully tests the role of physical impairment in personal identification. While Doyler's impairment remains, Jim's acceptance of him does not allow this impairment to become a disability. Doyler's economic struggle and his resultant injury does suggest, though, that economic misfortune effectively causes disability (with or without physical impairment).

¹²⁰ Backus rightly points out that Doyler is “an ardent follower of Connolly's *ideas* rather than Connolly the man” (78). He in fact represents a pure desire for individual freedom that will not subordinate itself to competing political aims.

¹²¹ Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (New York: Vintage, 1998), Bernard MacLaverty, *Cal* (London: Vintage, 1998).

¹²² Stephen Watt, “The Politics of Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*,” *Éire Ireland* 28.3 (1993), 134-5.

¹²³ Jeanette Shumaker, “Rivalry, Confession, and Healing in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*,” *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 9 (1997), 11. Shumaker's reading of *Cal* is quite sympathetic. Her suggestion that Cal's difficulty confessing to Marcella is “partly caused by his having no real language of his own” is somewhat circumspect considering that Marcella is Catholic and functions in the novel largely as a representative of an authentic Irishness that has been co-opted (through marriage) by a Protestant/British authority.

¹²⁴ Ironically, Marcella's marriage to her husband suggests—as it disavows—the possibility of choosing paths that go against sectarian division and expectation. Marcella rather seems punished by her choice to marry outside her religious community which leads to her responsibility to sympathize with the Morton's plight.

¹²⁵ Julian Moynahan, quoted in Richard Haslam's “‘The Pose Arranged and Lingered Over’: Visualizing the ‘Troubles’” in *Contemporary Irish Fiction*, eds. Liam Harte and Michael Parker (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 203.

¹²⁶ Peter Mahon, “Blood, Shit, and Tears: The Textual Reinscription of Sacrifice, Ritual, and Victimhood in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal*,” *ELH* 77 (2010), 73.

¹²⁷ The narrator of Deane's *Reading in the Dark* echoes this sentiment, noting that the Catholics make political festivals of their religious celebrations to keep up with the Protestants who have more acknowledge communal events.

¹²⁸ Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 63.

¹²⁹ For more on the fall of Parnell, see Curtis, *Cause of Ireland*, 155-9.

¹³⁰ Tom Herron, “Derry is Donegal: Thresholds, Vectors, Limits in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*,” *Études Irlandaises* 29.2 (2004), 167.

¹³¹ Stephen Regan, “‘Sacred spaces’: writing home in recent Irish memoirs and autobiographies (John McGahern's *Memoir*, Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and John Walsh's *The Falling Angels*)” in *Irish literature since 1990*, eds. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (New York: Manchester UP, 2009), 236-7. Regan presents a convincing reading of the novel's circularity and use of supernaturalism. Noting that the magical and actual often collide in the narrator's world, Regan highlights the tension here between official and unofficial Irishness in terms of old and new modes of communication and knowledge.

¹³² Liam Harte, "History Lessons: Postcolonialism and Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*," *Irish University Review* 30.1 (2000), 151.

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